Introduction

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The Problematics of Myth in Judaism

The proposition that myth plays an essential role in Judaism from its biblical foundations through the modern period often provokes controversy, denial, and debate. In the early twentieth century Jewish scholars proclaimed that Jews, no less than Aryans, possessed ancient and valuable myths. The work of Ignac Goldziher illustrates these efforts. Myths, he claimed, expressed certain patterns inherent in the human mind. By showing that Jews had invented myths exactly comparable to those of the Europeans, he hoped to prove the common humanity linking them. As Maurice Olender puts it "In asking the Christian West to recognize the `mythology of the Hebrews,' he was asking his contemporaries to assimilate the Jews into European culture."[1] While Goldziher pointed to myth as a common expression shared by Jews and non-Jews, the theologian Martin Buber argued for monotheistic myth as a distinctive form of Jewish religiosity. Buber evolved a complex and challenging definition of myth within Judaism to highlight what he felt to be some obscured characteristics of Jewish faith.[2] Each of these scholars points to the problematics involved in seeking to discover myth in Judaism.

Both Goldziher and Buber encountered resistance and opposition. The idea of "myth" in "Judaism" challenged established views of "monotheism" and the "faith of ancient Israel." In a way, Goldziher's task was easier than that facing either Buber or modern Jewish scholars. Goldziher had a ready made content for "myth," the results of nineteenth and early twentieth century study of European folklore. Wherever he could find traces of lore resembling that identified by scholars of myth in Europe, he would proclaim the presence of Jewish myth. Secondly Goldziher had a limited subject matter. He focused on "the Hebrews." Certainly no nineteenth or early twentieth century thinker could read that word without seeing it as a code name for "Jews." Nevertheless, Goldziher limited his investigation to evidence from the Hebrew Bible. He had a clearly defined textual arena in which he worked. These two advantages certainly helped Goldziher in his attempt to present a coherent theory. Yet his clarity did not prevent challenges. Many scholars claimed that the Hebrew Bible could not, by its very nature, contain myth. Others argued that Aryan myth by its very nature was intrinsically distinctive from Jewish myth. His definitions of both Judaism as the Hebrew Bible and myth as a common body of human arch-narratives was opposed from various sides.

Buber's task was even more difficult than Goldziher's. Buber constructed a new vision of both myth and Judaism. The task he set himself, that of "the discovery and raising of an ancient treasure, the unveiling and freeing of a folk-religion that has grown beneath the surface" demanded a creative approach to religious data.[3] Buber redefined Judaism in terms of his own philosophy of I and Thou and, unlike Goldziher, drew on biblical, postbiblical, medieval, and modern resources alike. While acknowledging that he was not a traditional or observant Jew, Buber sought to transmit the "spirit" of Israel. He looked to the "internal history" of the Jewish people rather than to some external expression to teach him the meaning of Jewish religion.[4] Buber's task in defining the sources in which he would discover "Jewish myth" far exceeded the limited scope that Goldziher set for himself.

Buber's approach to the idea of "myth" was equally ambitious. He generated a typology of myth, tracing what he saw as the natural evolution of human myth-making. He declared unequivocally that "the rationalist's definition of myth is too narrow, too petty."[5] In contrast, his exploration of types of myths, of the development of myth, and of its relationship to history and memory ranges across a variety of genre and forms. Indeed, for Buber, what distinguishes myth is less a matter of formal definition than of inner power. That power springs from the memory of an event; it evokes the originating moment in which humanity meets with the divine. Buber insists that a "living monotheism" requires myth for its continued vitality, for its continuity with the life-giving spirit that brought it into being.[6] While he proclaims that "The Jews are a people that has never ceased to produce myth," he also suggests that the "stream of myth-bearing power" flowed unevenly, sometimes in one expression of Judaism and sometimes in another.[7] The task of discovering "myth" in Judaism means discovering that Jewish expression in which one of the various forms of mythic power becomes incarnate. This vision of a variety of Jewish mythic expressions means that Buber will not impose a predetermined formal definition of myth on the data that he studies. Unlike Goldziher, Buber did not bring to his research a preconceived list of "myths" which he expected to find in his Judaism. He was as open to a variety of myths as he was to a diversity of Judaisms. Where Goldziher sought to define myth and Judaism precisely, Buber sought to open the floodgates to churning waves of

Judaisms and mythologies. He hoped to show how creative diversity enhanced the vitality of various Judaisms in the past and might do so once again in the present.

Naturally many modern thinkers find that Buber did not succeed in his attempt. Even in his own time thinkers as sympathetic to Jewish folk material as M. Y. Berdichevsky objected to Buber's use of the term "myth" to describe such works as Hasidic tales.[8] Despite his insight and creativity, using Buber's views of both Judaism and myth in modern research raises many problems. Modern Jewish scholars need to combine Buber's sensitivity and flexibility with the precision that Goldziher achieved. A contemporary study of myth in Judaism must provide a more specifically delineated definition of myth that communicates with the research on myth being pursued in religious studies generally. It must also work with a definition of Judaism that corresponds to contemporary studies of the history, literature, and development of Jewish religion.

Contemporary Jewish thinkers have given priority to a discussion of "myth" in Judaism. The work of scholars like Buber and Goldzhier have legitimized the discussion of several possible ways "myth" might be considered an aspect of Jewish religiousness. The fact that many students of Jewish religion recognize the essential ambiguity of the subject they study combines with an openness to "myth," making current discussions lively and diverse. Such scholarly conversation has implications for both academics and non-academics. How should Jews regard "myth?" Can they define it in ways appropriate to monotheistic religion? Can they create a definition of "Judaism" in which myth plays a central role? Can they integrate Jewish religion into the models scholars use for religion in general?

The Scope, Plan, and Purpose of this Volume

This present study does not provide a definitive answer to any of these questions. It offers, instead, a panorama of options—diverse definitions of myth, divergent understandings of "Judaism," competing evaluations of the "mythic" project. The very title of the book bristles with such ambiguities. Is "myth" "seductive?" Is it a "danger" threatening "Judaism?" Is it a challenge or an opportunity? The idea of "myth" seduces students of Judaism in at least three ways. First, it may seduce scholars who, fascinated by the allure of "myth," use the term to cover a multitude of their interests. Secondly, it seduces practitioners of

Judaism from a purely rationalistic approach to their faith to pursue one of several non-rational avenues of religious life, and finally it may seduce those interested in a particular tradition such as Judaism to revise their definition of it. The various chapters in this book not only define Judaism differently from one another, but define the seductiveness of myth differently. That diversity might leave this book a tissue of tensions and contradictions. The challenge for readers is to discover their own unity. The next section offers one example of how a reader might construe the book. The combination of chapters is, itself, pluralistic. A particular chapter might prescribe a scholarly method, a practical Jewish response, a view of history. Taken together each prescription counterbalances the other. Yet a reader might search the chapters to find whether or not myth serves a positive function in Judaism or not.

Discovering that means choosing definitions of myth and Judaism, then deciding which of the data presented seems most persuasive. Assuming a reader seeks to evaluate the place of myth in Judaism, how does this volume develop? The volume opens by considering the meaning of myth in Jewish scholarship. Two camps seem to emerge from the discussion. Some scholars, represented by Howard Schwartz, take a positive approach to Jewish mysticism, emphasizing its value and importance not only as a presence in the data but as a beneficent one. Others, like Joel Gereboff, warn against its power to distort meaning and actuality. A third group, represented here by S. Daniel Breslauer, suggests that the recognition of myth requires a rethinking of usual categories for understanding religion.

Howard Schwartz, who in his work as poet, as anthologizer, reteller of tales, and creator of new tales has helped vitalize Jewish myth for modern Jews begins with a mystical story which, he argues, contains within it examples from every type of Jewish myth. He proceeds by sketching that typology in association with the narrative he recounts. After that typological survey he urges the importance and value of myth for modern Jews and invites modern Jews to reappropriate their forgotten heritage.

This section of reflection on the value of myth continues as S. Daniel Breslauer expands the meaning of the term to any narrative which conveys messages about eternal patterns of life and history. Understood that way, Breslauer finds such myth surfacing in the secular poetry of Saul Tchernichowsky. This discovery of secularized myth requires a rethinking of what scholars should consider as "religious" or indicative of the "sacred."

Whereas Breslauer expands the meaning of myth and thereby transforms what counts as "Jewish religion," Joel Gereboff warns against the power of myth to alter facticity. He declares that again and again scholars are misled by myth and follow it, rather than historical fact, to reconstruct the past. Thus he finds that the so-called "historical" presentations of Judaism devised for school children actually recount myth. This use of myth is insidious because it stunts the critical faculties of students and prevents them from learning the historical method of sifting evidence and drawing conclusions. Gereboff does allow for a positive view of myth from the "postmodern" or "deconstructive" method, but approves of it only because it leads both teachers and students to acknowledge the inadequacy of all "scientific" methods and to confess that all reconstructions of the past are partial, incomplete, and mythic. His warning serves as a fit conclusion to this section which has celebrated both myth and its power.

The following section recognizes that "myth" is a modern category. The essays seeking to define myth focus on Jewish thinkers in the modern period. The essays agree in rejecting an earlier stage of scholarship which declared Judaism bereft of myth. Given that Judaism does retain mythology, however it might be defined, then scholars must understand by Judaism a different entity than that considered by previous generations. Michael Berkowitz affirms myth, even and especially in the modern period. Jewish myth when actualized by Zionist ideology, he claims has a positive and salutary effect on Jewish life. His investigation of the Zionist myth of the "New Man" claims that it animated a positive approach to Jewish tourism as a new Jewish ritual This myth enabled the members of the Yishuv to create bridges between themselves and the Jews of the diaspora, thus acting as a benign influence on world Jewry. Such a view is paradigmatic for the virtues of any myth. Even in pre-modern Judaism, myth may have function in this positive way, creating rituals that improved Jewish life. Berkowitz, however, does not identify the mythic Judaism he describes with any abstracted "Judaism."

Steven Wasserstrom goes beyond this to claim that any recognition of myth in Judaism requires a rethinking of the meaning of Jewish religion itself. Wasserstrom shows how an early attraction to myth arising from a fascination with Nietzsche led the disciples of Hermann Cohen toward mythic Marxism (as in the Frankfort school), or theology (Franz Rosenzweig), or to a critical use of history, as in Gershom Scholem. Only Scholem who managed to critique myth from within through his historical approach succeeded in continuing to use myth as a viable category after the rise of Nazism. Wasserstrom, then, takes a cautious approach to myth in Judaism, showing how some ways of construing Jewishness and myth are useful while others are not.

David Norman Smith reviews the more consistently darkside of myth. Smith focuses primarily on that demonic side of myth when showing how Lev Pinsker recognized in "Judeo-Phobia," particularly as expressed by such Romantic thinkers as Ernst Renan, a dangerous entity that could place Jews in an untenable position. The new Judaism conceived of by myth may engender disaster rather than promise progress.

The next, and longest, section of this book looks chronologically at classical Jewish myths from the Bible through the Sabbatian movement that some scholars at least see as the beginning of modernity. The six chapters in this section offer case studies of myths in Jewish history. Ronald Hendel shows how a positive attention to different mythic frameworks can help distinguish one biblical textual tradition from another. He follows that distinction out through later Jewish traditions as well. He seems to imply that given the ubiquity of myth the important question is that of deciding which myth becomes dominant. A particular Jewish period, then, can be distinguished by its mythic world view. Hendel's work confirms the insights of previous scholars by reinforcing textual analysis with attention to literary expression.

Deborah Sills also has a positive view of myth, claiming that because scholars have ignored Philo's use of the Joseph story as a myth of the politician in his recounting of In Flaccum, they have been unable to explain his positive view of Joseph in his cycle of patriarchal allegories and his negative view of Joseph in another work. Discovering the mythic dimension of stories does not weaken their significance, but rather makes that importance more transparent. Sills shows that noting the unexpected presence of myth where illuminates valuable insights.

In contrast, Richard A. Freund studies the case of an absent myth. He reviews the data available for the "Jewish myth of Jesus," wondering if such a myth exists. He discovers that it is absent from all the earliest strands of rabbinic material, only insinuating itself in the medieval period. He suggests that Christians, not Jews, seek a Jewish myth of Jesus and warns against inviting it into the academic circle.

This warning, of course, does imply that the presence of myth is an important positive discovery. James R. Davila suggests that myths may be suppressed for good reason. His study of Melchizedek as King, Priest, or God shows why both the earliest pre-biblical material and later Gnostic references to this figure may have disturbed orthodox religionists. He finds that the Deuteronomistic editors of the Hebrew Bible self-consciously eliminated myth only to have it creep back into various heterodox movements represented by the Dead Sea Scroll material and some Gnostic texts. The former reintroduce the mythic themes eliminated from the Hebrew Bible and the latter transform the innocuous material of Hebrew 7:2-3 into a Gnostic myth. His paper suggests a condemnation of myth without explicitly expressing it.

Elliot Wolfson shows attentiveness to myth reshapes the way scholars must view a historical period. The masculinization of the feminine moon through transformations in medieval Jewish liturgy must cause scholars to reconsider their characterization of Jewish mysticism. As the community of pious men drew closer to each other, they created a myth that reinforced their social cohesion. Implicitly, Wolfson's positive portrait of this community of males which myth supported, paints a negative portrait of previous scholars whose blindness to the intricacies of myth led to over simplifications.

David Halperin, in this collection's concluding essay, offers an outspoken criticism of myth in Judaism that goes even further than the caution offered by Davila. He shows how the messianic claimant Sabbatai Zvi appropriated the coronation myth of Metatron "whose name is like his master's" for his political purposes. He also shows how Sabbatai's own experience with the changing fortunes of the Sultanate in Turkey shaped his self-image and receptivity to that myth. Halperin reveals the demonic potential within myth and its ability to undermine social stability. Jews caught in a trap of false integration seized on myth as the solution to their problems. Mythic solutions, Halperin warns, are illusory and cannot achieve their promised results.

Readers need not accept this interpretation of the organization of the book as their own. Much has been overlooked to provide a consistent point of departure. Clearly Breslauer and Schwartz do not share a single view of myth. Breslauer uses a more literary definition, while Schwartz focuses on narratives of the supernatural. Berkovitz and Gereboff demonstrate another alternative definition, one that makes myth closer to ideology than to a particular genre or literary form. Both Halperin and Wolfson focus on what has been called "Jewish mysticism." The "Judaism" each posits, however, looks different. Perhaps this influences how they view the place of myth. All these differences will, undoubtedly, influence how a reader reads each chapter and may make the question of whether myth is a positive or negative factor irrelevant. Nonetheless, readers may, however, find approaching each chapter with such a question in mind a useful organizing principleas they seek to place the diverse essays into a single framework. The chapters resist such a unification, but daring readers may find the challenge rewarding.

Notes

1. M. Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*. Trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: 1992), 134.
2. See S. D. Breslauer, *Martin Buber on Myth: An Introduction* (New York: 1990).
3. M. Buber, *On Judaism*. Ed. N. N. Glatzer (New York: 1967), 155.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Ibid., 102.
6. See M. Buber, *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (New York: 1948), 22, 119-120.
7. M. Buber, *The Legend of the Baal Shem*. Trans. M. Friedman) New York: 1955), 11.
8. See M. Buber, *Briefwechsel*, Band I: 1897-1918. Trans. J. Amir and G. Stern [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: 1982), 224-225. 237.