Myth and the Old Testament

1. Definition of Myth

The initial difficulty in our topic is the definition of myth. The Oxford English Dictionary defines myth as “a purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena.” This definition does not represent an opinion which is gaining strength in contemporary scholarship. Some deny that it defines the thing to be defined; others regard it as composed a priori and too incomplete to be of much value. This scholarly trend is a recent development in philosophy and anthropology. Most contemporary exegetes, it seems, accept the saying of Hermann Gunkel that there is no myth in the Old Testament. Myth, according to Gunkel, was by its nature polytheistic, and it frequently represents the deity in close connection with nature. If this is the proper understanding of myth, there is no room for further discussion of the topic. But the question has been raised because of the efforts of philosophers and anthropologists to define myth in such a way as to remove the note of falsehood, which popular opinion places in the very definition; and exegetes ought to face the question.

One cannot review or even mention all the writers who have attacked this problem; but one cannot ignore the work of Ernst Cassirer. Cassirer treated the problem in more than one of his works, but his opinions remained substantially the same in his various writings. He defined myth with art, language, and science as a symbolic form of expression. These four have in common that they are “forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own.” The mythic mind is not the abstract analytical mind of discursive thought. Myth is an intuition, not an abstraction or a discourse, and the peculiar quality of mythical intuition is that its object, which is the momentary experience, becomes substantial and permanent. Myth differs from art in that it is an act of belief. It perceives physiognomic, not objective characters; its world is a world of actions, forces, and conflicting powers. To mythical and religious feeling nature becomes one great society, the society of life. For Mircea Eliade myth is an autonomous act of creation of the mind which translates an event into a mode of being. Myth expresses in action and drama what metaphysics and theology express dialectically. Myth is not merely story or tradition, because the object of myth is an archetype, which survives in an eternal Now. Myth is not history but exemplar history, the meaning and value of which lie in its repetition. Johannes Hempel calls myth a form of expression of belief, with no judgment about its veracity implied. Myth claims a correspondence with reality. The element common to all myths, according to Eduard Buss, is that they deal with the knowledge of the unknowable. The unknowable here signifies not the absolutely unknowable or mysterious, but that which is unknowable to man in a given concrete stage of intellectual development. The reality which he perceives but cannot recognize and define is inadequately defined by myth. Ultimately myth reduces all causality to the mysterious divine causality which lies beyond perception. Henri Frankfort distinguished mythical thought from logical thought in this, that where logical thought confronts the world of phenomena as an “It,” mythical thought confronts it as a “Thou,” and mythical thought is dominated by the “I-Thou” personal relationship. Frankfort defines myth as “a form of poetry which transcends poetry in that it proclaims a truth; a form of reasoning which transcends reasoning in that it wants to bring about the truth it proclaims; a form of action, of ritual behavior, which does not find its fulfilment in the act but must proclaim and elaborate a poetic form of truth.” Frankfort, generally following Cassirer, has set forth the characteristics of mythopoeic thought; it does not distinguish the subjective and the objective, reality and appearance, life and death, symbol and reality, part and whole, personal and impersonal causality. Myth is not discursive thought, which operates on general principles and accepted laws of thought and being. Admitting that reality
cannot be apprehended adequately by myth, mythic thought accepts the validity of more than one avenue of approach. These avenues may be contradictory in their form of expression, but mythic thought dismisses the contradiction, since reality can be expressed only by manifold images. The contradiction lies not in the manifold images of reality but in reality itself. E. O. James writes: "... the conception of myth in popular thought and language cannot be sustained since it is not primarily a fictitious narrative setting forth the exploits of supernatural persons and the unusual and fantastic behaviour of natural phenomena, or of historical occurrences."20 "The chief purpose of... myths has been to stabilize the established order both in nature and in society, to confirm belief, to vouch for the efficacy of the cultus, and to maintain traditional behaviour and status by means of supernatural sanctions and precedents."20 "Myth ... gave expression to the fundamental experience of a divinely ordered world in which a conflict of supernatural powers and forces was immanent, the one hostile and the other beneficial to their well-being. To fulfill its proper functions it must always be a symbolic representation of the ultimate reality, however this may be conceived and interpreted, concerning the essential meaning and facts of existence and of human destinies. ... Enshrined in it are the deepest realities, the things by which men live. ... It is a reality lived. Consequently, every vital religion must have its mythology because myth is the natural language of religion just as ritual is its dramatization in worship."21 M. Leenhardt describes myth as reality apprehended in images, words, and deeds, and notices that myth and rational knowledge coexist not only in ancient but also in modern society, since neither form of mental operation can do the work of the other nor entirely supplant it.22 C. van der Leeuw has said: "Doctrine can never completely discard the mythical if it wishes to avoid falling to the level of a mere philosophical thesis."23

Millar Burrows has summarized the new view of myth as "a symbolic, approximate expression of truth which the human mind cannot perceive sharply and completely but can only glimpse vaguely, and therefore cannot adequately or accurately express. ... Myth implies, not falsehood, but truth; not primitive, naïve misunderstanding, but an insight more profound than scientific description and logical analysis can ever achieve. The language of myth in this sense is consciously inadequate, being simply the nearest we can come to a formulation of what we see very darkly."24 And

C. Henton Davies writes: "Mythology is a way of thinking and imagining about the divine rather than a thinking or imagining about a number of gods. ... Myth is a way of thinking, independently of a polytheistic setting."25 Hence it is legitimate to raise the question of myth and the Old Testament once more. The usual denial of myth in the Old Testament does not touch myth as it is understood in these recent studies. These studies may make it possible to accept myth as a vehicle of truth, and as such it is not by definition excluded from the literary forms of the Bible.

In answering the question of myth in the Old Testament we must remember that the concept of myth in modern scholarship is not strictly univocal. There is no generally accepted definition, and the forms of expression which are covered by the term are too diversified to be easily brought together. Much of the constructive work on mythology has been done by anthropologists. When we deal with the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia and Canaan we are not dealing with primitives. The men who built the cities, the industries, and the commercial networks of the ancient world, wrote its literature and created its art cannot be placed on the same level with the Semangs of the Malay peninsula.

I do not think that the difficulty of elaborating a precise and comprehensive concept of myth makes it impossible to give some answer to the question of myth and the Old Testament. This question touches a definite and known collection of literature which has been closely studied: the myths of Mesopotamia and Canaan. It is to this body of literature that we must turn for the answer to our question. We need not create a philosophy of myth in order to answer it. If we can identify certain patterns of thought and expression in this literature, we should be able to tell whether there is anything in the Old Testament which corresponds to these patterns. What we must avoid is a definition of myth so broad that myth ceases to be a distinct intelligible concept. It seems that one can say with Aage Bentzen that myth is not an independent literary type,26 hence when I employ the word "myth" in this discussion, a more precise term would be "mythopoetic thought," a phrase which is used by Frankfort.

We find it easier to say what myth is not than to say what it is.
Myth is not mere metaphor; myth so understood has no identity of its own. Nor is myth mere poetry, poetic apprehension and expression. Myth is not history, even in the sense in which we use the word history of ancient literature; nor is it the story, popular tradition in the usual sense of the word. It seems most unlikely that the Assyrians would have regarded the story of Ishtar's descent to the underworld as the same type of story which might be told of Semacherib's victorious campaign in western Asia. It is doubtful that myth should be identified entirely with nature myth, although the connection between myth and nature is very close. Here we do well to remind ourselves that in the ancient Near East there was no concept which corresponds to the modern concept of nature. The world of nature was phenomena: numerous, diverse, and often conflicting, hostile or beneficent to man, exhibiting what we call personal traits and understood as a world of personal beings. But myth was not an allegorical view of nature. Nature deities like Aleyan Baal and Anath represented no particular force or phenomenon of nature, unless one wishes to call such things as life, death, and sex natural forces or phenomena. But there are in Mesopotamia myths which deal with the relations of man with the gods, and these cannot be classified with nature myths.

Myth is not logical discursive thought; hence it is not strictly true to say that myth is a philosophy or a theology. Neither is myth a substitute or an alternate for discursive thought. It does not really do the work of discursive thought, the work of analysis, organization, and synthesis. Those who employed mythical thought did not employ it because they preferred it to discursive thought, at least for some questions, or because they believed it achieved a deeper insight than discursive thought; they employed it because they had no other mode of thought. When discursive thought arose among the Greeks, the conflict between discursive thought and myth at first led to a self-conscious employment of myth as poetic ornamentation or allegory, then to a rationalization of myth and a conversion of myth into the terms of discursive thought, and finally to an abandonment of myth in its classical form. The remark of Leenhardt is true of Greece, however, as it is in general; myth continues to coexist with discursive thought even in advanced civilizations.

What is called the myth-ritual pattern school identifies myth as the discourse, the hieros logos, which accompanies ritual. Some anthropologists say that the rite comes first and that the myth is added to explain the rite and to determine its validity explicitly. The importance of the ritual myth in the ancient Near East has been indisputably established by modern research; as a universally valid principle to explain the origin of myth it is not so definitely established. There is much Near Eastern mythology for which no place has been found in the cult; until a place has been found for it, it seems that we ought to leave open the possibility that the single explanatory principle of myth, if there be such a principle, is to be sought outside the myth-ritual pattern.

Can we draw up a positive definition of myth as it appears in the ancient Near East, or at least a description? Our discussion up to this point encourages us to go beyond the common popular conception and the dictionary definition if we can. But we ought to note that the central and essential character of myth cannot lie merely in its opposition to logical discursive thought; this, again, would make its definition so broad that it would comprehend perhaps most of the human ideational process. We should note also that while myth seems always to be associated with religious belief and practice, myth should not be so closely associated with religion that the two become identical. If myth is identified simply with polytheism, we shall find it difficult to explain some biblical passages. It is not within the scope of this paper to do that, which a generation of scholars has not yet done; to present a philosophy of myth which is organized and comprehensive. I present the remarks which follow as no more than a description of some common traits which emerge in the mythical literature of the ancient Near East and are generally so recognized by the scholars who have studied this literature. I cannot say that this description is complete, or that any single feature is to be regarded as the essence from which the other features are derived as properties.

In the first place, it seems that we must with Cassirer identify
forces, and the beneficent or maleficent effect of the play of these forces on man suggested to them the presence of a personal activity like the unpredictable activity of human beings. In this reality were rooted the phenomena which they observed.

The concept of cause and effect is so different in mythical thinking from what it is in philosophy and science that the terms are almost equivocable.

Cassirer has written: "Isolating abstraction, which singles out a specific factor in a total complex as a 'condition,' is alien to mythical thinking. Here every simultaneity, every spatial coexistence and contact, provide a real causal 'sequence.' It has even been called a principle of mythical causality and of the 'physics' based on it that one take every contact in time and space as an immediate relation of cause and effect. The principles of post hoc, ergo propter hoc and post ut hoc, ergo propter hoc are characteristic of mythical thinking." 23

"Whereas empirical thinking speaks of 'change' and seeks to understand it on the basis of a universal rule, mythical thinking knows only a simple metamorphosis . . . When scientific thinking considers the fact of change, it is not essentially concerned with the transformation of a single given thing into another; on the contrary, it regards this transformation as possible and admissible only if one is a universal law is expressed in it, in so far as it is subsistent on its own and eternally independent of the mere here and now, and of the constellations of things in the here and now. Mythical 'metamorphosis,' on the other hand, is always the record of an individual event, the change from one individual and concrete material form to another. 24

"Science is content if it succeeds in apprehending the individual event in space and time as a special instance of a general law but asks no further 'why' regarding the individualization as such, regarding the here and now. The mythical consciousness, on the other hand, applies its 'why' precisely to the particular and unique. It 'explains' the individual event by postulating individual acts of the will." 25

Causality in mythical thought is the intuition of a cosmic event which is reflected in the succession of events in the phenomenal world. Without the cosmic event the phenomenal event would not happen or would cease. The succession of phenomena was not governed by the known laws and properties of natural bodies and
natural forces; natural bodies and natural forces as such were not known, and no laws of their behavior had been established. The succession of phenomena was achieved by the interplay and sometimes by the conflict of personal wills on a cosmic scale. This does not mean, as I have remarked, that the various personalized forces, whether gods or demons, which the myth-maker saw in the unknown reality were merely allegorical figures of wind, rain, and so forth. The gods are distinguished from the phenomena, and the symbolism is more subtle than the crass allegorism which would identify Hadad with the storm. Were there no Hadad, there would be no storm; were Hadad not a personal being, the storm would not exhibit the capricious behavior which makes it for man both a blessing and a curse. The great seasonal myth of fertility is an expression of the mysterious fact that life as man experiences it comes only from death. Hence the distinction between the two is blurred. The world is annually re-created; were it not for the original creation annually renewed, the cycle of fertility would not endure in the world of phenomena, and the monster of chaos would secure lasting dominion. But the gods of fertility are not merely symbols of natural forces; the succession of phenomena depends on the perpetual life-death cycle on a cosmic scale, and these gods make the cycle. Now the concrete cosmic event can be expressed only in the form of a story. Without discursive thought the myth-maker cannot elaborate the abstract universal concept and deduce general principles. Both the story and the concrete cosmic event are removed from time as it is known in the phenomenal world; they become eternally recurrent.

When we say that myth is wider than nature myth, it is necessary to define our extension lest it become unintelligible. Some classifications of myth made independently by several writers will indicate the area covered by the mythopoetic faculty. Paul Tillich distinguishes myth as cosmological, anthropological, soteriological, and eschatological. Johannes Hempel classifies myth as cosmogenic, soteriological, and the revelation myth. René Largemont classifies Akkadian and Canaanite myths as myths of origins, myths of the quest of life, and myths of deliverance. There is substantial agreement in these classifications.

The pattern of myth is used to formulate not only the origins of the universe and of man but also the origins of human institutions, the ideals and desires and ambitions of man, and his success or failure in achieving them. In all these the myth ultimately goes to the unknown underlying reality, whether this reality be explicitly identified as a divine personal being or not. Hence the description of myth as a Göttergeschichte, “a story about gods,” is not entirely adequate. This pattern of thought and language was intended in the minds of those who employed it not as a vehicle of falsehood or of fiction for the sake of entertainment, but of truth. Does its failure to express truth come from the thought pattern itself or from some other cause working defectively? Is myth so essentially vitiated by the polytheism of the myths which we know that myth cannot be so defined as to exclude polytheism, while the pattern of thought and language remains? Is there any more reason to call myth an essentially defective thought pattern because of its errors than there is to call philosophy an essentially defective thought pattern?

I suggest, with the writers cited above, that in defining myth in such a way as neither to include polytheism nor to include it we do no violence to the mythical literature of the ancient Near East nor to any pattern of thought which logical discourse imposes upon us. If the myth-makers were striving for an intuition and an expression of truth, we must give them credit for what they strove to do. Their failure to express the truth about the transcendental reality which lies beyond the phenomenal world is not of necessity to be explained as due to the essential inadequacy of the thought and language processes which they employed. In attempting to tell stories which symbolized the transcendental reality they succeeded only in telling the story of the phenomenal world over again on a larger scale. They did not break through the limits of the observation of phenomena, and their symbols symbolized the unknown without signifying its “wholly other” character. They did not attain the divine; they brought the divine down to their own level, and doubtless they thought they had attained it in reducing it. I submit that they were satisfied with their view of the divine because it was an easier view which made few demands upon them; the ultimate root of their error was not in their thought patterns but in their will.
II. Mythical Patterns in the Old Testament

So much, then, may be said in explanation of one of the two terms of our topic, and it seems necessary to say it. Turning to the other term, we may state at once and without any need of demonstration that the Old Testament certainly makes extensive use of mythical language, imagery, and conception; this is generally accepted by modern scholars. In an earlier chapter I treated Genesis 2-3 as an original composition of the Yahwist tradition largely made up of fugitive pieces of mythological allusion drawn from various sources. In connection with this passage I also treated Ezekiel 28:12-18 as a variant form of the story of the first man which is likewise an original piece of Hebrew tradition but is more mythical in character.

Hermann Gunkel pointed out as examples of mythical conception and language: the treatment of natural phenomena as the action or the experience of personal beings (Ps 19:6; Is 14:12 ff.; the rainbow, Gn 9:12 ff.); the description of the eschatological period as a return to conditions of the primitive period of creation; etiological stories such as the creation of woman from the rib (Gn 2:21 ff.); the origin of human soil and the pains of childbirth (Gn 3:16 ff.); the union of the sons of God and the daughters of men (Gn 6:4 ff.). In addition, Gunkel finds mythical elements in poetry and prophecy: an allusion to the story of the first man (Jb 15:7 ff.); poetic variations on the creation story; eschatological events such as the world catastrophe, which is a reversal of creation and a return to chaos (Is 24:19, 17:12 ff.); the sword and judgment of Yahweh upon the nations (Is 34:5); the return to chaos (Jer 4:23 ff.); the golden age (Is 11:6 ff.); the imagery of prophetic visions, such as the enthroned Yahweh (Is 6) and the chariot of Yahweh (Ez 1). Johannes Hempel has adverted to what he calls the historicization of myth, by which he means the use of mythical conception and imagery to describe a historic event, such as the fall of the great king represented as a descent into Sheol (Is 14:5-15); Israel as the bride of Yahweh, a response to the myth of fertility (Hos 2; Yahweh has no divine spouse, He has chosen Israel; cf. also Is 62:1-5). Hempel also sees mythological language and conception in eschatology, especially in such features as the Day of Yahweh (Jl 2:10 ff.; 3:1 ff.) and the final victory of Yahweh over His enemies (Is 51:9-13; 1:21-27) and in particular in the tension between history and eschatology in the prophets, which frequently permits them to describe contemporary events in terms of the Day of Yahweh. Edmond Jacob also has adverted to the historicization of myth. In this conception the mythical event, the importance of which lay originally in its character as "exemplar history" (Eliade) and its eternal Now by which it sustains the succession of phenomena, loses its transfiguration and becomes important as a single event. Geo Widengren alleges the assembly of the holy ones (Ps 89:18; 16:3; Dn 9:13, Ex 15:11; Ps 82); the identification of Jerusalem with the mountain of the north, the mountain of assembly (Ps 48:3); Gn 2-3 and Ez 28; the imagery of the theophanies (Ex 19; 33:19-23; Jgs 5:4-5; 1 Kg 19:9-18; Hb 1). Evidently these instances are not all of equal value, and the scope of this paper does not permit an analysis of each pattern. Equally evidently, however, some of them do bear the stamp of the mythopoetic pattern; cf. my own treatment of some of these passages cited in notes 42, 43, 47, 48.

In some instances the mythical character of the thought and language is evident. The conception of creation as a victory of Yahweh occurs in several passages. Edmond Jacob says that these passages reflect a history of creation, not a myth of creation; the characteristics of myth, especially repetition, he finds absent. It is true that the passages appear to be no more than echoes of the creation myth of the Near East. But Jacob has not defined the characteristics of myth; and not all of the characteristics which I have outlined above are absent from these passages. I am now no longer ready to accept these passages as mere poetic imagery and embellishment; I would rather say that Hebrew religious belief was broad enough to admit more than one symbolic form in which the belief in creation could be expressed. One, which is found only in fragments in the Old Testament, is the victory of Yahweh over the monster of chaos; the other and more reflective account appears in Genesis 1, but this passage too has a relation to myth. The creative combat includes a characteristic of mythical thinking which is rarely verified elsewhere in the Old Testament: the conception of the event as eternally recurring. The creative victory is constantly achieved anew. Yahweh continually slays the monster, but in some passages He keeps it under restraint, thus He removes the perpetual danger that it may break loose and the world may return to "void and waste." Creation is thus a continuing achievement.
he attributed to the kindliness of God, who spared man the extreme punishment which his rebellion might well deserve.

The creation account of Genesis 1 is another example of a re-treatment of a known myth. Here, however, the writer has excised the mythical elements more radically; he has written an explicit polemic against the creation myth. Polytheism is removed, and with it the theogony and the theomachy which are so vital in the Mesopotamian form of the myth. Even the creative combat is removed, and the author has very little left of the myth except the structure of the universe, which is not strictly a mythical concept. The act of creation is achieved in entire tranquillity, and it is achieved simply by the creative word—an element which is paralleled in the Memphite theology of Egypt.

Now what are we to call such compositions as the creation account of Genesis 1 and the deluge story? The Hebrew did not replace myth with history; it is impossible to suppose that he had historical knowledge of either of these events. He retains too many traces of the myth for us to suppose that he had another source on which to draw. Some might wish to call the Hebrew version a theological reconstruction or interpretation. Theology, however, is logical discourse: a synthesis of abstract concepts which are obtained by the analysis of phenomena. Discursive thought does not appear in the Old Testament, and to call such passages theology is to use the term improperly. It may be necessary to use some term improperly, but why should it be theology? Actually, the Hebrews displaced the objectionable story only by telling another story; and whether this other story is to be called myth depends ultimately on the definition of myth.

Extending the question to other passages where mythical thought and language appear, we may ask whether the Hebrews chose deliberately to portray the unknown reality with embellishments drawn from the wealth of mythical imagery, although they were able, if they wished, to describe the reality in more sober and less figurred language. We have no right to say that they proceeded in this manner. They had no abstract discursive thought, and I believe we may say of them, as we say of the myths of other ancient peoples, that they regarded such passages as apprehensions of
Some recent writers exhibit an inclination toward an affirmative answer. Adolf Kolping: "... We should not fail to see that the categories of expression in Israel, like the non-Israelite ancient oriental representations, have the same peculiarity. If the word myth were not so objectionable in our own speech, we could speak without hesitation of a similar formally mythical type... The truth of a proposition consists obviously in the correspondence of the content of expression, mediated by the categories of expression, with objective reality... The inspired author of the Pentateuch has incorporated into Genesis the old narratives with their peculiarity of unreflecting unity of attractive means of expression and purposeful content of expression. Here he had ideas preconceived and preformulated which corresponded to that which he wished to say,"  

A.-M. Dubarle: "These different considerations lead to the admission that the story of Eden, and more generally the entire primitive history, proceed from the faith of Israel by the means of mental activities which, in religions less clearly linked with history and lacking the same knowledge of the true God, have arrived at mythical stories. This solution, which admits the close union of matter and form in the mind of the sacred writer, recognizes in these chapters a literary form which is very largely symbolic, without the necessity of distinguishing the historical portions from the fictional portions... [This biblical history] reaches the fact in literary productions related to myth, but in which the content and the orientation of mythical thought have been profoundly modified by the historic faith of Israel."  

E. M. Leenhardt: "... rationalism has never been able to expel religious thought from human preoccupations. Religious thought is concerned with those human realities which can be apprehended only by mythical knowledge." The same writer explains his application of the term "myth" to the fall of Adam and the redemption in these words: "It is self-evident that the word 'myth' is employed here in the sense of a circumscribed event indicated in these pages, a manner of apprehension intended to seize a reality which escapes the senses."  

J. Henninger: "So it is seen how revelation, which is not a mythical event but a precise historical event, could utilize the language of myth, granted that this is the most adequate way for the divine pedagogy to reach man. It is seen also how the most profound tendencies of the mythical attitude—among others, the actualization of the primordial events—could find their accomplishment and their sublimation in Christianity."  

H. Cazelles: "However transcendental the biblical message is, it is too deeply immersed in the oriental literary world not to be expressed in the
forms used in this world. ... The myth is the literary form which expresses the need of man to know the divinity, not under an abstract and metaphysical form but in a personal and concrete manner. ... The myth expresses the personal character of the forces which operate upon man in and through nature. Biblical religion always remains a religion in which man has personal relations with God, knowing him as will and spirit. Cazelles would limit the word to the earliest portions of Hebrew literature.

It should be stated emphatically that no one who has followed the recent discussions of myth and mythical thinking will be in danger of placing the biblical conception of these things on the same level with the myths of ancient peoples, against which Pius XII warned in Humani Generis. The recent literature on the subject, viewed in globo, brings out more sharply the difference between the Hebrew treatment of the material of myth from the treatment of other ancient peoples.

Eduard Buss places the difference in the idea of God, which is the unique feature of the Bible. The Yahweh of the Old Testament is not a form posited by mythical thinking, the mythical thinking of the Near East, as far as we know it, showed itself incapable of producing any such form. The unique character of this God is so evident that it needs no discussion. Is the concept so unique that it shatters myth beyond repair? Certainly not to the extent that mythical patterns of thought and language are entirely excluded from the Bible, as we have seen. But the conception of God affects very seriously one of the characteristics of mythopoetic thought which I have enumerated; for God is the unknown reality recognized as unknown and symbolized by mythological forms, the divine background which is conceived as personal. Hebrew religion is unique precisely in that the unknown is not totally unknown. In their own belief the character of this God was known through His revelation of Himself. Their treatment of mythical pieces such as the deluge and the creative combat is to remove anything which is out of character with the God who revealed Himself to them. This knowledge of God through the revelation of Himself they possessed. But the unknown remained unknown and mysterious; man was incapable of a total revelation. When the Hebrews touched upon the questions of the relations of God with nature, with man, and with society, what resources were available to them to give expression to the impact of this mysterious reality upon phenomena and upon their own minds? They had no logical discourse of science and philosophy through which they could express these relations. It is not a tenable view that God in revealing Himself also revealed directly and in detail the truth about such things as creation and the fall of man; the very presence of so many mythical elements in their traditions is enough to eliminate such a view. All they could do was to represent through symbolic forms the action of the unknown reality which they perceived mystically, not mythically, through His revelation of Himself.

III. Conclusion

Whether this Hebrew representation of reality is to be called mythopoetic may appear to be merely a question of terminology. Since the recent discussions of myth are known only in the world of scholars, and not even throughout that world, the application of the terms myth, mythical, and mythopoetic to the Old Testament will certainly be misunderstood. My colleague R. A. F. MacKenzie has suggested the term “religious prehistory” to designate the material of Gn 1–11. This term is probably an echo of the term “primitive history” coined by Père Lagrange in 1902. I am doubtful that this term is altogether acceptable. If history must in some sense mean a human witness of past events, the application of the term to this material stretches the term at least as far as it will go. The term is not applicable at all to the mythical patterns of eschatological passages or to the creative combat. These passages have such a distinctive character that it is very difficult to classify them with any recognized literary forms. I remarked above that perhaps some term must be improperly applied; if it is not to be theology or history, why should it not be myth? And is not myth a less improper term than these others? No doubt something should be added to distinguish these passages from the myths to which the name has so long been exclusively applied. Tentatively and as no more than a step in the right direction I suggest that mythopoetic
pieces be classified under the general heading of wisdom rather than history; this has already been suggested by A.-M. Duharde for the Paradise story.\textsuperscript{a1}

But the question is perhaps deeper than terminology; it may even be a question of the honesty and integrity of scholarship. The studies of the past generation have brought all exegetes to a realization of the kinship of Israel with the ancient Near East in civilization and literature. The theological and religious significance of the Old Testament, we know, has gained, not lost, by this broadening of perspective; this is less well known and realized outside of professional circles. Certainly we have an imperative duty to make this truth better known. Our studies of the Near East have taught us to understand the language of Israel better, to enter its mind, and to share its experience. The more deeply we share its experience and its cultural milieu, the more overwhelming becomes our awareness that Israel’s experience of God was like nothing else in the ancient world. Surely there now ought to be little room for timidity and misunderstanding if we call Hebrew literature in some passages mythical, or wisdom discourses couched in mythopoetic patterns. Even if the rigorous ethics of scholarship do not clearly demand the adoption of this terminology, they do demand the recognition of Israel’s community with the ancient Near East in patterns of thought and language. We shall never understand the Old Testament unless we learn to read its language. To make it speak our own language is ultimately necessary if we are to make it intelligible; but we cannot do this unless we have first apprehended its meaning in its own literary, cultural, and historical Sitz im Leben. The Hebrew intuition of the ineffable reality which revealed itself to man as the personal reality behind the succession of phenomena, the agent of the great cosmic event which we call creation, the reality from which all things came, in which they exist, and to which they must return, was not the creation of mythical form or of logical discourse, but a direct and personal experience of God as the “Thou” to whom the human “I” must respond. But they had no media through which they could enunciate the ineffable reality except the patterns of thought and speech which they inherited from their civilization.