

## DEMYTHOLOGIZING – THE PROBLEM OF MYTH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT\*

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The subject of myth is a vast and complex one. To do it justice one would require an all-embracing competence in such diverse fields as early Greek literature and drama, the comparative study of religion, anthropology, psychoanalysis and the philosophy of history. It is important, however, that the problem of myth in the NT – that is whether there is myth in the NT, and if so what the NT exegete does with it – should not be tackled on too narrow a front, but rather should be set in the wider context of the investigation and treatment of myth in other disciplines. We shall first therefore briefly examine the concept of myth in general (I); we should then hopefully be in a better position to evaluate the various claims made over the past 150 years or so that mythological thinking and particular myths have decisively influenced the NT writers in their presentation of the salvation event of Jesus Christ – particularly the key contributions of D. F. Strauss (II), the History of Religions school (III) and R. Bultmann (IV).

### I. *The Problem of Definition*

The basic problem of myth is the problem of definition. There are two questions here: (1) What is myth? Is the word “myth” a hold-all for a wide diversity of meanings, or should its use be restricted as a narrowly defined technical term – clearly marked off, for example, from legend and saga, folk tale and fairy tale, symbol and analogy? (2) What is the function of myth; what does myth do? Or, as I prefer to put the question, What is the *truth* of myth? Does one remain at the level of explicit statement and story? Or is the truth of myth *implicit* – a subconscious and unintended disclosure of the nature of man and his world?

(1) What is myth? “There is no one definition of myth, no Platonic form of a myth against which all actual instances can be measured.”<sup>1</sup> The problem of definition extends back to the original usage of the word *μῦθος*. In terms of etymology it means simply “word” or “story”. And in early Greek literature its meaning can range from a “true story”, “an account of facts”, and so “fact” itself, to an invented story, a legend, fairy story, fable or poetic creation.<sup>2</sup> But in later Greek thought *mythos* came to stand in antithesis both to *logos* (rational thought) and *historia*, and so came to denote “what

cannot really exist". In a western Europe conscious of its Graeco-Roman heritage it was inevitable that this sense of "myth" should be determinative, so that in the 19th century "myth" usually meant anything that was opposed to reality. For the same reason it was probably inevitable that the term should become attached primarily to the ancient stories of the Greeks – the stories of Prometheus, Perseus, Heracles, etc. – so that the "classical" (and still popular) meaning of myth is a fabulous, untrue story about gods (or demi-gods) set at the dawn of time or in a timeless past.

In the 19th and 20th centuries however the concept of myth has been thrown back into the melting pot, and its meaning and the precise demarcation of its meaning are the subject of a vigorous and ongoing debate. In his recent essay on the subject W. Pannenberg distinguishes three main competing views.<sup>3</sup> (a) "Myth" as used by anthropologists and comparative religionists – that is, myth as a story whose subject is the primal age and whose function is to provide a basis for the present world and social order in that primordial time – what M. Eliade calls "archetypal history". "Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'." <sup>4</sup> (b) Myth as defined originally by C. G. Heyne – myth, that is, as a primitive conceptual form, the "mode of conception and expression" in the childhood of the human race, exposing the structure of primitive consciousness as yet untouched by modern science; such mythical thought has been rendered obsolete by modern science. As we shall see, it is this concept of myth which has dominated the debate about demythologizing within NT hermeneutics.<sup>5</sup> (c) Myth as poetry, myth as belonging to a sphere where it is judged by standards other than that of its understanding of the world, myth as symbol and drama able to awake feeling, "invite thought" and evoke response.<sup>6</sup>

When we turn to the problem of myth in the NT we must bear in mind this diversity of meaning of the word "myth" and not permit any one definition to determine and answer the problem from the outset.

(2) What is the truth of myth? The paradox of a word which could mean both "fact" and "invented story" did not escape the Greeks, and the problem of the truth content of myth was one which tested the finest minds of the ancient world as it does today. Above all we should mention Plato. Plato was openly critical of traditional myth, though he allowed that the best of them, even if false (*ψευδος*) had a value in teaching children.<sup>7</sup> More important, he recognized that mythical thought was an indispensable complement to rational thought (*logos*). "Myth carries the lines of *logos* organically beyond the frontiers of conceptual knowledge . . . It arises when there is need to express something which can be expressed in no other way." <sup>8</sup>

In the modern discussion about the truth of myth many answers have been proposed. The following are probably the most important. (a) The dominant view among anthropologists at the turn of the century (E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, etc.) was that myth only tells us something about primitive man, how he speculated about the heavens and the annual cycle of nature and fertility, how he handled his fears of the unknown (particularly

death and beyond), how he conceptualized the mysterious in his present experience (gods, demons, spirits), how he sought to control and manipulate these powers by ritual magic, and so on. (b) Closely associated with the first was the view that myth fulfilled a *legitimation* function: that myth originated from ritual and its truth lay in legitimizing the cult (W. Robertson-Smith), or the broader idea of “charter myth” – a story used to assert and justify a tribe’s rights, loyalties and beliefs and lacking any deeper meaning (B. Malinowski).<sup>9</sup> (c) More recently the recognition of the importance of dreams in psychoanalysis has led to the understanding of myth as the expression of the subconscious, the archetypal images rising from the depths of man often drawing on the psychic heritage of centuries and so telling us something about man as he is. “Myth is the natural and indispensable intermediate stage between unconscious and conscious cognition.” “Myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings.”<sup>10</sup> (d) Somewhat analogous is the structuralist definition of the French anthropologist C. Lévi-Strauss who holds that the true “message” of myth is nothing to do with content as such; myth is rather a piece of algebra about the workings of the human mind in the abstract. Lévi-Strauss believes that the structure of all myths is identical with that of the human mind: human thought is a process of binary analysis; so myth is a model whereby the binary divisions in society, the contradictions in man’s view of the world (between village and jungle, male and female, life and death, earth and sky, etc.) can be resolved and overcome. In a phrase, myth reveals man striving to create order out of the contradictions in which he finds himself involved.<sup>11</sup> (e) A fifth understanding of the truth of myth may be termed the poetic view – myth as the expression of a whole area of human experience and awareness, of (universal) values and truths, that can only be presented in symbolic language, what K. Jaspers calls “the cipher language of myth”<sup>12</sup> – myth as the poet’s awareness of a “moreness” to life than eating, sleeping, working, loving, without wishing or attempting to define that “moreness” except by means of evocative images and symbols.<sup>13</sup> (f) A sixth view is that at least some myth is the expression of distinctively religious experience, that ultimately myth is not merely man’s response to what he thinks of as divine, but is itself somehow revelatory of the divine. Thus “stories about gods” may not always simply be the expression of primitive, unscientific conceptualization but may rather in the first instance be the product of religious consciousness, “the vestibule at the threshold of the real religious feeling, an earliest stirring of the numinous consciousness”.<sup>14</sup> So too the “which came first?” controversy in the myth-ritual debate may be wrongly conceived, since the roots of both myth and ritual may lie in primitive man’s attempts to express an irreducibly religious experience. Or in Jung’s words.

“No science will ever replace myth, and a myth cannot be made out of any science. For it is not that ‘God’ is a myth, but that myth is the revelation of a divine life in man. It is not we who invent myth, rather it speaks to us as a Word of God.”<sup>15</sup>

The primary problem of myth is therefore the problem of definition. As we narrow the focus of discussion to the NT, we must constantly ask of those who postulate the presence of myth in the NT, What kind of myth? Myth in what sense? Above all we must bear in mind that mythical thinking can move on different levels: myths as consciously invented stories intended merely to give pleasure or to serve a legitimation function; myths as primitive conceptualizations of reality now *wholly* superseded by the advance of scientific investigation, though perhaps still retaining a power to evoke and move particularly by their repetition in the cult;<sup>16</sup> myth as a veiled window into the reality of man, whether into the structure of his mind or into the depths of his collective subconscious, or as an expression of his values and aspirations;<sup>17</sup> myth as man's conscious or unconscious perception of a "beyondness" in his experience of reality, which comes to him with the force of inspiration or revelation, which can be expressed only by means of symbol and image and analogy, and which may neither uncritically nor unscientifically be taken as *prima facie* evidence of an ontological reality which is "larger" and more complex than our scientific investigations have so far recognized.<sup>18</sup> If myth or mythological thinking is present in the NT we must not *assume* that it moves only on one level and not another, but must always ask, What is the function, what is the truth of this myth? in each individual instance.

## II. *The Problem of Miracle – D. F. Strauss*

Is there myth in the NT? Insofar as NT writers take up the question the answer is a blunt and unequivocal No! The word itself is found only five times (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Tit. 1:14; 2 Pet. 1:16) and in every case the writers completely repudiate myth. For these writers myths are invented and untrue stories, whether Hellenistic speculations about divine emanations or more Jewish speculative interpretations of OT stories. Myth is unreal, untrue, unhistorical, in contrast to the reality, truth and historicity of the gospel. What is rejected here, however, is only one *genre* of myth. The question of whether other levels of myth and of mythological thinking are present in the NT is neither posed nor answered.

Subsequent attempts to wrestle with the problem at this deeper level reveal something of its complexity. I am referring here to the long and respected tradition of biblical interpretation by means of allegorizing. For by turning to allegory the allegorizer expresses his dissatisfaction with the obvious meaning of the biblical text (it is unedifying, outmoded, or whatever) and seeks for a deeper meaning. That is to say, he treats the biblical narrative as a type of myth whose literal meaning can be disregarded and whose truth can be extracted by the methods of allegorical exegesis. This was certainly the way Philo used the OT. So too the Alexandrians (particularly Origen), even though they rejected the charges of opponents that the biblical accounts are in fact myths, nevertheless by using allegorical interpretation treated the Bible in effect as a collection of myths.<sup>19</sup>

In the 19th century the problem of myth re-emerged with disconcerting sharpness as the problem of miracle; or to be more precise, with D. F. Strauss myth was given a central and positive role in the NT as the decisive answer to the problem of miracle. For much of the 18th and 19th centuries the question of miracle stood at the storm centre of theological debate. For many the truth of Christianity stood or fell with the historicity or otherwise of the biblical miracles<sup>20</sup> – not unnaturally since for centuries Christian apologetic had presented the miracles of the Bible as sure proof of the supernatural origin of and divine approval for Christianity. But post-Enlightenment man, with his growing scientific knowledge of the cosmos and his high regard for the perspicacity and sufficiency of reason, found the very concept of miracle less and less satisfactory: the laws of nature, the chain reaction of cause and effect, could not be violated and suspended in the way “miracle” supposed; God would not work in such an arbitrary and unreasonable manner. Miracle ceased to be an aid to apologetic and became instead an embarrassment and a problem.

This is Strauss’s starting point for his minute investigation of the events of Jesus’ life.<sup>21</sup> Since miracles are incompatible with natural law (and with reason) they are incompatible with history; and since miracles are incompatible with history, then the Gospels are not historical records. What is the status of the Gospel narratives then? Strauss’s answer is simple: they are *myths*. What does Strauss mean by myth? As his negative assessment of the Gospels shows the influence of post-Enlightenment rationalism, so his positive assessment shows the influence of German idealism. For Strauss myth is the expression or embodiment of an *idea*; it is the form in which the idea is apprehended.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the Gospels, myth is the expression of the first Christians’ idea of Christ – an idea shaped partly by Jewish expectations concerning the Messiah and partly by the “particular impression which was left by the personal character, actions and fate of Jesus”. It was this idea of Christ which gave rise to the accounts of miracles in the Gospels; the miraculous element in any recorded event was created out of or by the idea.<sup>23</sup> Some of these accounts are *pure* myths – that is, they have no historical foundation whatsoever: for example, the cures of the blind, the feeding of the 5,000, and the transfiguration, which all grew out of the disciples’ belief that Jesus was Messiah, the one greater than Moses and Elijah according to Jewish expectation.<sup>24</sup> Others are *historical* myths – that is, a historical fact overgrown with mythical conceptions culled from the idea of Christ: for example, “Peter’s miraculous draught of fishes [Luke 5.1–11] is but the expression about the fishers of men [Mark 1.17] transmuted into the history of a miracle”; and underlying the now mythically presented baptism of Jesus is the historical event itself.<sup>25</sup> In a word, myth is an invented, symbolical scene.

Strauss’s contribution to our subject has been epochal and is still fundamental to the modern programme of demythologizing. His painstaking scrutiny of individual narratives, his careful analysis of what the miracle intended by the evangelist would have involved, and his ruthless exposure of

the shifts and artifices to which rationalist explanations of Gospel miracles resorted, is without equal in NT scholarship.<sup>26</sup> It is largely due to Strauss that more recent debates on the historical Jesus have focused on the teaching of Jesus rather than on his "works". Perhaps above all, Strauss showed the importance of starting with the text as it stood, and of respecting the purpose of its author; against those who played down or explained away a Gospel miracle he insisted that where the writer intended to narrate a miracle his intention must be taken seriously. Furthermore, he showed that there are other considerations to be taken into account than simply those of historicity: the *idea* of Jesus cherished by early Christianity, or, as we would say now, their *faith* in the risen Jesus, must have influenced their representation of the historical Jesus; simply to ask after the historicity of this or that episode or detail may be to miss the author's point.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, Strauss's basic statement of the problem of "miracle" and his use of "myth" cannot escape criticism. In effect he works with the equation: miracle = story of unnatural/unhistorical event = myth = idea. But does the equation hold?

(1) To define miracle as "a transgression of a law of nature..." (Hume),<sup>28</sup> or even to judge an event "irreconcilable with the known and universal laws which govern the course of events" (Strauss) begs too many questions about natural law. Of course the "law" of cause and effect is axiomatic in all scientific investigation – inevitably so – and its operation can be easily recognized in such a relatively simple case as one billiard ball striking another. But whenever we are dealing with human relationships or the relation between the physical world (especially the body) and the psyche (including such unquantifiables as temperament, will-power, purpose) the matter is more complex. What is and what causes a decision? What is the scientific explanation of love and does it begin to do its subject justice? Is the pleasure and uplift I experience at hearing Beethoven's Eroica Symphony merely the effect of certain sound waves on my ear drum? And so on. The "chemistry of human relationship" raises the question of other or complementary causes which are less determinable than (other) "natural laws". Such considerations become all the more important when one is discussing the impact of a charismatic figure such as Jesus.<sup>29</sup> And if this line of reasoning were pursued it would also become possible to postulate divine activity in a "miracle" even though the closed web of history and the continuum of cause and effect as it presents itself to objective observation is left undisturbed.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, we must question any definition of miracle which sets God as cause over against the natural world in a dualistic way, so that any effect attributed to God must be described in terms of "violation" or "intervention". For all the sophistication of our understanding of the universe how far in fact have we passed beyond the threshold of knowledge of reality in all its complexity and depth? After all, at the time Strauss was writing his *Life of Jesus*, Michael Faraday was only beginning to recognize the nature of electromagnetic waves with his talk of "lines of force" and conception of a sort

of cosmic cobweb of electrical forces – a comparatively recent discovery in the history of scientific investigation. What other sources of energy and “lines of force” (particularly in relation to the human personality) have we yet to discover simply because we have not yet been able to conceptualize and measure them? I think here, for example, of such parapsychological phenomena as telepathy and levitation, claims concerning which have been made for centuries and yet have still been too little investigated.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps after all reality consists of a sort of intermeshing of physical, psychical *and spiritual* forces in a cosmic pattern of which only a few threads at present are visible, not least in the human being himself, so that, for example, the concept of “demon-possession” regains in status as the first century’s recognition of the complex forces (not least spiritual) which bear upon the human personality (to put it no more strongly). Such a conceptualization of reality can be maintained without lapsing into pantheism or denying the “otherness” of God.<sup>32</sup>

(2) Moving to the other end of Strauss’s equation, it is evident that there are two central characteristics of his concept of myth: myth is the narrative of an *unhistorical* event; myth is the embodiment of an *idea*. These two characteristics are the two sides of the one coin: where an account is unhistorical (evidenced by historical improbabilities and inconsistencies) there is a mythical idea; where there is myth (evidenced for instance by poetic form or messianic ideas) there is no history. Idea (myth) and history are mutually exclusive.

But this dualism between history and idea (or as we would say today, between history and faith) is too sharp.

(a) Are all accounts of miracles to be explained as inventions to embody ideas? What, we might ask, are the ideas which created the stories of miracles attributed to the other Galilean(?) charismatics, Honi the Circle-Drawer (1st century B.C.) and Hanina ben Dosa (1st century A.D.)?<sup>33</sup> Perhaps these stories testify to nothing more than the imagination of the story tellers of the Galilean bazaars and market places. But more likely they testify to some sort of historical feats on the part of Honi and Hanina which gave rise to their reputations. So too with Jesus. For the earliest Christians the most probable source for many of the accounts of Jesus’ miracles would be the recollections of episodes in Jesus’ ministry circulating in Galilee and among his first admirers and disciples.<sup>34</sup>

(b) Are history and idea (faith) mutually exclusive? No doubt post-Easter faith is discernible at many points in the miracle stories (see note 27), but has it created the whole, or is it merely hindsight? Strauss himself recognized that Jesus’ role as an exorcist cannot be disputed on historical or literary grounds,<sup>35</sup> but in his view historical improbability tells against the historicity of other cures attributed to Jesus.<sup>36</sup> Yet he fails to take account of the fact that Jesus himself appealed to a much wider range of healings, and that it was Jesus who saw them as evidence of the presence of the blessings of the end-time (Matt. 11:5/Luke 7:22).<sup>37</sup> Idea and history are here united by Jesus himself! If we took this point in conjunction with the considerations

marshalled above (p. 290f.) and pursued the argument at greater length than this paper permits, even the so-called nature miracles would become much less clear cut in terms of strict historical improbability,<sup>38</sup> and in particular the possibility would begin to gain in strength that the transformation in Jesus' mode of existence which we call "resurrection" was not so much an exception to natural law as a paradigm of the inter-relationship of physical and spiritual, a partial glimpse of the overall pattern of persons and things.

(c) The logic of Strauss's dualism between history and idea is worked out to its conclusion when Strauss attempts to reduce christology to the idea of God-manhood, an idea embodied in Christ but only mythically not historically, an idea realized only in (an idealized view of) Humanity.<sup>39</sup> Here Strauss's Hegelian idealism comes to full flower, only to wither before the blast of man's inhumanity to man, since he has so completely cut it off from the one historical root that could give it sustenance.

All this does not demonstrate the historicity of any one miracle attributed to Jesus. But hopefully enough has been said to show that Strauss's flight from history at this point was premature, and that his posing of the problems of miracle and myth in the NT was inadequate. "Myth" (in Strauss's sense) and "miracle" are not synonymous.

### III. *The Influence of Jewish and Hellenistic Myths*

At the turn of the century the problem of myth in Christianity was posed in a new form by the History of Religions school.<sup>40</sup> Already at the time of Strauss the growing awareness of other religions had brought home the significance of the fact that in laying claim to various miracle stories Christianity was not at all unique. Even before Strauss the conclusion had been drawn that if these other stories are to be judged unhistorical myths, the same verdict cannot be withheld from the biblical accounts of creation, virgin birth, etc. But in the latter part of the 19th century and early 20th century various influential scholars came to the conclusion that not only did Christianity have its own myths, but in fact Christianity had been significantly influenced at its formative stage by particular myths of other religions; indeed, the plainly mythical thinking of other systems had decisively shaped Christian faith and worship at key points. The chief sources of influence were thought to be the myths of Jewish apocalyptic, of Gnosticism and of Hellenistic mystery religions.

(1) Jewish apocalyptic thought can justifiably be labelled mythical – particularly its concept of an end-time and new age qualitatively different from this age (restoration of primeval paradise, Zion's glory, etc.) and its portrayal of the end in terms of cosmic catastrophe (slaying the dragon of chaos, stars falling from heaven, etc.).<sup>41</sup> And it would be hard to deny that Jesus was influenced by apocalyptic thought or that apocalyptic thought had a constituent part in the theology of the early church (Mark 13 pars; and 2 Thess. 2:1–12; Rev. 4–21).<sup>42</sup> But in what sense is Jewish and Christian apocalyptic mythical? Certainly the language of apocalyptic is not



to be interpreted literally or pedantically, as is clear from the apocalyptists' use of symbol and cipher (e.g. the "great beasts" and "seventy weeks" of Dan. 7; 9: "that which restrains" and "the breath of his mouth" of 2 Thess. 2; "the lamb" and the beast with the number 666 of Rev. 5; 13).<sup>43</sup> Yet to describe apocalyptic hopes merely as invented stories created to comfort believers in time of crisis would be unjust. Rather are they inspired visions of the future born of confidence in God alone. Thus, for all the mythical character of its language (for example, the primeval dragon myth in Rev. 12ff, as in Isa. 27:1; 51:9f),<sup>44</sup> the general point can be made with some force that apocalyptic embodies a dissatisfaction with the present and an insight into or revelation of future reality as God's which is integrally and irreducibly Christian. How else, after all, can hope which is neither rooted in nor dependent on the present world express itself?<sup>45</sup>

(2) The debate about the influence on NT thought of Gnostic motifs, particularly the pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth<sup>46</sup> is long and complex.<sup>47</sup> It must suffice here to note that already there was speculation concerning the Primal Man at the time of the earliest NT writings (Paul), that this speculation is properly described as mythical (myth in the sense of an account of "archetypal history"), and that Paul's Adam Christology shows Paul's awareness of it and indeed may not unjustly be described as part of that first century speculation – though Paul's contribution is distinctively Christian (1 Cor. 15:44ff; cf. Phil. 2:6ff).<sup>48</sup> Perhaps also Paul's description of the body of Christ in cosmic terms (Eph. 1:10, 23) owes something to gnostic-type thought. Of course Paul has no intention of reducing Christ to a symbol expressive of community or to a cosmic idea, though what he conceives to be the ontological reality of Christ underlying this image is not easy to determine. So too if there is anything that can properly be called a "divine man" christology, related to Primal Man speculation, which can be said to have influenced the presentation of Jesus as a miracle worker by the opponents of Paul in 2 Cor. and the earlier collections of miracle stories used by Mark and John,<sup>49</sup> then the point to note is that all three NT writers provide a sharp corrective by emphasizing that the character of the gospel is determined by the suffering and death of Jesus.

(3) A central element in many of the major mystery cults at the time when Christianity came to birth was the (variously represented) myth of the god who dies and rises again – the myth deriving ultimately in most cases from the annual cycle of the earth's fertility. The History of Religions school claimed that initiation to the cult was conceived as an identification of the initiate with the god in his dying and rising again, and consequently maintained that Hellenistic Christianity was strongly influenced by the mysteries, particularly in its theology of baptism.<sup>50</sup> This interpretation of the mysteries and hence of their potential influence on Christian thought has been strongly and justifiably challenged;<sup>51</sup> however, the fact remains that the more we interpret Paul's view of the sacraments in terms of a conveying or bestowing of grace or Spirit, the less easy is it to deny the influence on Paul of the mythical thought of Gnosis or the mysteries.<sup>52</sup>

The impact of the History of Religions school on the problem of myth in the NT has been considerable and lasting. Indeed the parallels between the Jesus depicted by NT faith and the Jewish and Hellenistic myths were thought by some to be so striking that they concluded that Jesus himself was a mythical construct, nothing more than an amalgam of Jewish messianic and apocalyptic hopes with the Hellenistic myth of the dying and rising god.<sup>53</sup> The artificiality and special pleading of such attempts is their own condemnation. On the contrary, the parallel between Christian faith and these Jewish and Hellenistic mythical formulations breaks down precisely at this point. By applying the same sort of (mythical) language to a *historical* individual the NT writers in effect demythologize it. This is true even of the more history-conscious Jewish apocalyptic: Son of man ceases to be merely a man-like figure (Dan. 7:13 – in contrast to the beast-like figures, 7:2–12) and becomes Jesus of Nazareth; similarly Joel's apocalyptic hope (including the "wonders in heaven" and "moon turned to blood") is taken to be fulfilled by the events of the first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2:16–21). The contrast is even sharper with the Hellenistic myths. Sallust said of the Attis myth: "This never happened, but always is."<sup>54</sup> In direct antithesis, the NT writers proclaim, "This *did* happen" (Jesus' life, death and resurrection) and only thereby can the redemption for which the Jewish and Hellenistic world longed come to historical realization for man now and hereafter. Thus, even if the same sort of mythical language has been used to describe the "Christ event" and Christian experience and hope of salvation in the NT, the point to be noted is that by its reference to Jesus the Hellenistic, unhistorical myth has been broken and destroyed as myth in that sense.<sup>55</sup> The parallels between myth-type language in the NT and the particular myths of Hellenistic religion and philosophy should not blind us to its particular function and thus distinctive truth within NT Christianity. It is this function and truth which it is the task of demythologizing to uncover.<sup>56</sup>

#### IV. *The Problem of Objectifying God – R. Bultmann*

Despite the sharpness of the challenge posed by Strauss and History of Religions scholars like J. Weiss, W. Heitmüller and W. Bousset, the dominant theology at the turn of the century (Liberal Protestantism) had been largely able to shrug off the problem of myth. In the last analysis myth in the NT was of little consequence since it did not touch the heart of the gospel proclaimed by Jesus. The problem of miracle could be ignored since Jesus himself assigned nothing of critical importance to his miraculous deeds. The problem of Hellenistic influence on Paul could be ignored by emphasizing the gap between Jesus and Paul. Even the problem of apocalyptic influence on Jesus could be set aside since apocalyptic was only the shell and husk of Jesus' message which could be stripped off to uncover a kernel of timeless moral truth untouched by myth.<sup>57</sup> Rudolf Bultmann destroyed this comfortable position by denying that gospel and myth could be distinguished in this fashion. For Bultmann the kerygma is expressed

*through* myth, not alongside it or inside it. The gospel is not somehow separate and distinct from myth; rather it is embodied in the mythical language of the NT. To discard the myth is to discard the gospel. With Bultmann therefore the problem of myth seems to threaten the gospel itself, and posed in these terms it touched many raw nerves, sparking off a debate which has as yet produced no large scale consensus.

Bultmann's whole work has in effect been addressed to different aspects of this problem,<sup>58</sup> but it was his 1941 lecture which set the present debate in motion.<sup>59</sup> Here, although his summary statements of the problem are oversimplified and confusing, his understanding of myth is fairly clearly that of C. G. Heyne (see above p. 286): viz. myth is a primitive, pre-scientific conceptualization of reality. There are two key characteristics of myth in this sense: it is incapable of abstract thought and it lacks understanding of the true causes of natural and mental processes.<sup>60</sup> Evidently in Bultmann's view NT thought can be described as mythical because it evinces these characteristics: for example, it represented the other worldly in material, spatial terms, the cosmos as a three storied structure (underworld, earth, heaven); and it attributed mental disorders to demons who were everywhere on earth and causation of events to spiritual powers who controlled the lower reaches of heaven. In the 20th century we no longer conceive reality in such terms; with the development of scientific knowledge we cannot: "it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world" (p.4).<sup>61</sup>

The problem is, however, that the gospel in the NT is expressed in these terms – Jesus' healings as a victory over demons, his death as a triumphing over the powers, his "ascension" as a literal going up (from second to third floor), his "parousia" as a literal coming on clouds from above back down to earth, and so on. What is to be done? We cannot simply cling to the first century world view – that "would mean accepting a view of the world in our faith and religion which we should deny in our every day life" (p. 4). Nor can we reject the myth while preserving the gospel unscathed (pp. 9f, 12). The correct solution, argues Bultmann, is to *demythologize* it – that is, *not* to *eliminate* the myth, but to *interpret* it.

But to demythologize one must have some insight into the truth of the myth in question. Such an insight Bultmann claims, though the claim itself is presented in arbitrary manner and on the basis of the undeclared assumption that mythological thinking (*all* mythological thinking?)<sup>62</sup> is concerned with precisely the same questions as Bultmann himself.

"The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially . . . The importance of the New Testament mythology lies not in its imagery but in the understanding of existence which it enshrines" (pp. 10f.). Yet though he fails to justify his starting point he does attempt to justify his procedure. Demythologizing is not simply a matter of reading Heidegger's existentialism into the NT. On the contrary, the criterion for determining the

truth of NT myth is "the understanding of human existence which the New Testament itself enshrines" (p. 12).<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, while he does justify his claim that demythologizing must involve interpretation in existential terms, it is the "only in existential terms" implicit in his starting point which leaves him most vulnerable to criticism.

In the second part of the essay he elaborates the NT "understanding of existence", principally from Paul. And lest his presentation of "the life of faith" should appear no different from the existentialist philosopher's talk of "authentic existence",<sup>64</sup> he goes on to insist, again in rather arbitrary manner, that the possibility of such authentic life becomes *actual* (as distinct from remaining *theoretical*) only through "the event of Jesus Christ" (pp. 22–33). This does not mean however that he has retreated once more into the language and thought forms of the NT. For when he goes on to talk of the saving event of cross and resurrection it becomes fairly clear that he is talking in fact of the *proclamation* of cross and resurrection as saving event, about saving event in the here and now of existential encounter with the kerygma:

"To believe in the cross of Christ does not mean to concern ourselves with a mythical process wrought outside of us and our world, or with an objective event turned by God to our advantage, but rather to make the cross of Christ our own, to undergo crucifixion with him" (p. 36). "The real Easter faith is faith in the word of preaching which brings illumination" (p. 42).<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, in an essay given over to an investigation of the christological confession of the World Council of Churches, Bultmann maintains that so far as the NT is concerned statements about Jesus' divinity "are not meant to express his nature but his significance."<sup>66</sup>

The questions raised by all this are legion, and I have already criticized Bultmann's setting up of the problem at several points; but here we have space to take up only three issues.

(1) The real problem for Bultmann is not the problem of mythological language as such, but the problem of any language which *objectifies* God (hence the title to this section). It is the problem of what to do with language which speaks as though God was an object, as though God's activity consisted in objective acts within the space-time complex which were therefore open to historical investigation and so to verification or falsification, so that faith would become dependent on the findings of historical and scientific research.<sup>67</sup> That this was the real problem of NT mythology for Bultmann was already evident in the 1941 essay,<sup>68</sup> but it became more explicit in his subsequent restatements of the problem: "Mythological thought . . . objectifies the divine activity and projects it on to the plane of worldly happenings"; "myths give to the transcendent reality an immanent this-worldly objectivity"; "mythological thinking naively objectifies the beyond as though it were something within the world."<sup>69</sup> It is because mythological language is objectifying language and so threatens faith that demythologizing is necessary.

For the same reasons demythologizing is possible only in terms of ex-

istentialist interpretation; only the language of existential encounter enables Bultmann to speak of God's activity without objectifying it. God acts now; faith recognizes God acting in the existential encounter of the word of the cross which addresses me as a word of God, as a word of grace. It is by wedding faith firmly to the kerygma alone that Bultmann seeks to deliver faith from the vagaries of historical criticism and from myth. Hence his claim at the end of the 1941 essay: "It is precisely its immunity from proof which secures the Christian proclamation against the charge of being mythological" (p. 44). So too his claim at the end of his later discussions: "Demythologizing is the radical application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the sphere of knowledge and thought. Like the doctrine of justification, demythologizing destroys every longing for security."<sup>70</sup>

But can we equate the problem of myth in the NT so completely with the problem of objectifying God? And if existentialist interpretation is really addressed to the latter problem does it provide such a theologically satisfying answer to the former problem as Bultmann claims? These two questions provide the cues for my other two comments.

(2) What is NT myth? In the 1941 essay Bultmann defined mythology as "the use of imagery to express the other worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side" (p. 10 n. 2). This definition was rightly criticized since its concept of myth is too all-embracing:<sup>71</sup> in particular the definition confuses myth and analogy and in effect makes it impossible to speak of God at all.<sup>72</sup> Bultmann recognized this and subsequently attempted to defend the legitimacy of talk of "God as Creator" in terms of analogy.<sup>73</sup> But as soon as one recognizes that "use of imagery to express the other worldly in terms of this worldly" can be legitimate (that is, without objectifying God) – use of metaphor, symbol, analogy – the question arises, How much of the "mythological language" of the NT is in fact metaphor, symbol and analogy? Does the "God-talk" of the NT always imply such a naive and primitive conceptualization as Bultmann assumes? We have already noted how the Acts 2 sermon treats the cosmic spectacle language of Joel 2 as little more than apocalyptic sound-effects. So we must ask whether the NT writers' concept of the cosmos was quite so unsophisticated as Bultmann suggests. For example, the seer of Revelation quite obviously intended his language to be understood symbolically (see above p. 292f.). And if P.S. Minear is right, "the prophet was aware of the danger of absolutizing the relative and of diminishing the inexpressible transcendence of God to the dimensions of his own creation."<sup>74</sup> Paul certainly thought in the current terms of more than one heaven, but how he conceptualized them and whether he considered any language adequate to describe them is another question ("whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows", "unutterable utterances" – 2 Cor. 12:2ff); and though he talked of spiritual powers as real beings in the heavens (e.g. Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 2:6, 8; Eph. 6:12), it is clear that for Paul the "powers" which pose the greatest threat to man are the *personifications*, sin, death and law.<sup>75</sup> To take only one or two other

examples: was the talk of Jesus' death as sacrifice, of atonement through his blood, intended as any more than a vigorous metaphor giving a meaningful way of understanding Jesus' death to hearers long familiar with the practice of sacrifice, a metaphor, that is, drawn from the life of the times like the correlative metaphors of cleansing, justification, redemption, adoption, etc? It would certainly be quite justified to argue that the kerygma of the letter to the Hebrews in effect "demythologizes" the sacrificial ritual and the temple by emphasizing the reality of forgiveness and of immediate personal relationship with God in the writer's "here and now".<sup>76</sup>

The issue is of course more complex, but at least the point begins to emerge that much of the "mythological" language of the NT was in fact analogical and metaphorical language – and consciously so – only the analogies and metaphors were the ones appropriate to the age and inevitably took up the language and concepts of the age. But if the beyondness of God was often conceived in terms of "somewhere beyond the frontiers of scientific knowledge", then the fact that first century frontiers of scientific knowledge were not very far advanced does not really touch the metaphorical and analogical value of first century attempts to speak of that beyondness. In short, Bultmann's posing of the problem of myth in the NT is inadequate because the questions, What kind of myth? Myth in what sense? have not been subjected to a sufficiently thorough examination.

(3) What is the truth of NT myth? If demythologizing in existentialist terms is addressed to the problem of objectifying God does it really answer the problem of myth? Does Bultmann's reduction of the "God-talk", Christ-event talk to the kerygmatic encounter of the here and now really uncover the truth of such mythological language as is used in the NT? Paradoxically, while his concept of myth in the NT is too broad (2), his understanding of the truth of myth is too narrow.<sup>77</sup> Bultmann has been attacked here from two sides. He has been attacked by his more radical disciples for the illogicality of his stopping place. If the gospel can be translated so completely into existentialist categories without remainder, why does Bultmann insist on retaining a reference to Christ, and defend so vigorously his right to continue speaking of "God acting in Christ"? If "the self understanding of the man of faith is really the constant in the New Testament",<sup>78</sup> then where does christology properly speaking come in at all? Does Bultmann's flight from history into the kerygma answer the problem of myth since the kerygma is itself mythological; does Bultmann's programme of demythologizing not logically involve "dekerigmatizing" as well?<sup>79</sup> If faith is merely man's possibility of authentic existence, then the realisation of that possibility cannot be tied exclusively to Christ.<sup>80</sup> Why indeed retain the idea of God at all? Does the first century concept of a cosmologically transcendent God not demythologize existentially into the concept of self-transcendence?<sup>81</sup>

These attacks bring out a point which should not be ignored – that Bultmann has always seen his task at this point in terms of Christian evangelism and apologetic (as well as being required by the NT itself). He wishes to

affirm the gospel and to “defend” faith by setting it free from the objectification and meaninglessness of first century conceptualizations. “The task of demythologizing has no other purpose but to make clear the call of the Word of God.”<sup>82</sup> Hence his initial setting up of the problem in terms of a distinction between kerygma and myth<sup>83</sup> – the heritage of German idealism allowing him to affirm almost as an *a priori* that the kerygma is the truth within the myth, a truth which challenges me today without conflicting with the 20th century scientific world view. Yet it is difficult to see how Bultmann’s position can hold before the criticisms of such as Ogden without the arbitrary appeal to faith born of the kerygma to which Bultmann is in fact reduced.<sup>84</sup> But his resort to fideism has obviously proved unsatisfactory to those cited above – and by the very canons to which Bultmann himself appealed when he proposed his programme of demythologizing. Consequently the apologetic stand must be made further to the right.

The criticism of Bultmann from the right has often been expressed in terms of reducing theology to anthropology, which is not altogether unjustified, but forgets that Bultmann added “or better still, existentially” (see above p. 295 and n. 62). The same criticism is better expressed in terms of reducing christology to soteriology,<sup>85</sup> or as the criticism that he has telescoped what faith might wish to affirm regarding the past and the future into the present. On the contrary, Christian faith must make affirmations about Jesus as Jesus, and about past and future including the past and future of Jesus Christ (as well as about God) if it is to retain any meaningful continuity with original Christianity.<sup>86</sup> In particular, it must be said that if the phrase “the resurrection of Jesus” is not attempting to talk about something which happened *to Jesus*, if it merely describes the rise of Easter faith,<sup>87</sup> then it is of no more value than the mystery religions’ myth of the dying and rising god, for all that it has been attached to a (once) historical (now dead) figure.<sup>88</sup> In which case, the focus of Christianity must shift from the Christ of faith to the historical Jesus, or Christianity itself reduces to a mystery cult; that is, Christianity becomes a form of *imitatio Christi* moralism (Jesus the first Christian)<sup>89</sup> or a modern vegetation cult (Christ the principle of life, the image of annual rebirth), and whatever grace is experienced through it cannot either legitimately or meaningfully be described as “the grace of God in Christ”. Moreover, if “the resurrection of Jesus” is not saying something by way of promise about the present and future of *Jesus* as well as about the present and *future* of believers, then we must also point out that Christianity loses the purpose and hope which originally was one of its crucial and distinctive elements.<sup>90</sup> To be sure, the Fourth Gospel’s shift in emphasis from future to past and present (“realized eschatology”) can be dubbed a sort of “demythologizing”,<sup>91</sup> but only if one recognizes that its realized eschatology does *not* involve a total abandonment of future eschatology (5:28f.; 6:39f., 44, 54; 11:25; 12:48; 14:2f.; 17:24);<sup>92</sup> even for John the truth of the “eschatological myth” includes a still future hope which does not dissolve away in the acids of the demythologizing process. Bultmann fails to realize

how much NT myth cannot be demythologized because it is saying something fundamental to the Christian gospel and saying what cannot be expressed in other than mythological terms.<sup>93</sup>

In short, it would appear that because it is addressed primarily to the problem of objectifying God rather than to the wider problem of myth in the NT, Bultmann's programme of demythologizing fails to do justice to the truth of NT mythological language by abandoning the very historical and ontological affirmations about Jesus which that language is able to convey by its very nature as myth. Space forbids the fuller discussion which the subject deserves.

### V. Conclusion

What is the problem of myth in the NT? It is not reducible to the problem of miracle; the activity of the divine within the world need not be conceived in terms of intervention and suspension of natural laws. It is not reducible to the problem of dependency on other mythological formulations which conceptualize the hoped for deliverance from the frustrations and contradictions of the human condition; when such borrowing does take place the character of the mythological language is transformed by its reference to the historical man Jesus. It is not reducible to the problem of objectifying God; the two problems overlap only in part, and to equate them is to ignore much of the truth of NT myth.

The problem of myth in the NT is that the NT presents events critical to Christian faith in language and concepts which are often outmoded and meaningless to 20th century man. More precisely, the problem of myth in the NT is (1) the problem of how to speak of God at all, the problem of analogy, *compounded* by the fact that many of the NT metaphors and analogies are archaic and distasteful to modern sensibilities (e.g. blood sacrifice); (2) it is the problem of how to speak of God acting in history, *compounded* by the fact that in the first century world the activity of divine beings is often evoked as the explanation for what we now recognize as natural and mental processes, that is, where the natural cause and effect sequence is not recognized and causation is attributed *solely* to the divine *instead* (e.g. epilepsy as demon possession); (3) it is the problem of how to conceptualize the margin between the observable domain of scientific history and "beyond" and how to speak of "passage" from one to the other – *compounded* by the fact that out of date conceptualizations determine certain traditionally important expressions of NT faith about Christ at this point – in particular, the problem that "ascension" (Acts 1:11) and parousia "in clouds" "from heaven" (Mark 13:26; 1 Thess. 4:16) were not merely metaphors or analogies but were intended as literal descriptions, but descriptions which derive from and depend on a first century cosmology which is impossible to us.

The problem is that the faith and hope of the first Christians is not readily distinguishable from this first century language and conceptualization. On



the contrary, their faith and hope is expressed *through* that language; it does not have an existence apart from that language. The question then to which demythologizing addresses itself is whether the gospel is forever imprisoned within these first century thought forms, whether it can be re-expressed in 20th century terms. Are we justified in saying that there is a faith and hope which can be expressed in other language and thought forms but which *remains the same faith and hope*? If such first century theologizing as Adam christology, talk of spiritual powers in the heavens and ascension can no longer have the same meaning for us as it had for the first Christians, what meaning should it have?

The problem of myth in the NT is thus a complex one and an adequate answer would require careful exegesis of many different passages. Perhaps I have said enough in the earlier discussions to indicate the broader theological considerations which would guide my own answers, and the following chapter continues the discussion on a somewhat different tack. The point is that each must tackle the problem for himself and no one else can tackle it for him; for in the end of the day it is the problem of how *I* express *my* faith as a Christian. The more one regards the Christ-event and the faith of the first Christians as normative, the more tightly one is bound to the expressions of the faith and hope of these first Christians as the starting point for the elucidation and interpretation of one's own self-understanding and experience of grace. By this I do not mean of course that one must cling to the words themselves as though they were a sort of magic talisman. Rather one must always seek to rediscover afresh the reality of the love and faith and hope which these words expressed, and then seek to re-express that reality in language meaningful to one's own experience and to one's neighbour. The process of demythologizing is therefore a dialectic between me in all my 20th century conditionedness and the faith of the first Christians in all its first century conditionedness. Such a dialectic is not a once-for-all question and answer from one to other, but a continuing dialogue of question and answer where each repeatedly puts the other in question and where one wrestles existentially with the text and with oneself till an answer begins to emerge – an answer which poses a further question in reply. Nor is it a dialogue which involves only my voice and the voice of the past, since it is only part of the wider human search for reality and truth and other voices break in posing other questions and offering other answers. Nor is it a dialogue which can ever reach finality of form or expression since each man's question is peculiarly his own and since 19th century gives way to 20th and 20th begins to give way to 21st and each new generation has its own agenda; rather is it a dialogue which must be taken up ever afresh by each believer and by each believing community. In short, the dialectic of demythologizing is the language of living faith.

## NOTES

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1. G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge 1970), p. 7.
2. G. Stählin, *μῦθος*, TDNT IV, pp. 766–9; cf. also C. K. Barrett, “Myth and the New Testament”, Exp.T 68 (1956–57), p. 345.
3. W. Pannenberg, “The Later Dimensions of Myth in Biblical and Christian Tradition”, *Basic Questions in Theology* III (E.T. London 1973), pp. 1–22.
4. M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, (London 1964) p. 5; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Art. “Myth”, Vol. 15, p. 1133. Eliade is criticised by I. Strenski, “Mircea Eliade: Some Theoretical Problems”, in A. Cunningham, ed., *The Theory of Myth* (London 1973), pp. 40–78. See also I. G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms* (London 1976), pp. 19ff.
5. See also W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (E.T. London 1973), pp. 101ff, 121; and see below p. 295. R. A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing* (Leiden 1974) points out that the work of B. Fontenelle, *De l'origine des fables* (1724) considerably predates that of Heyne (pp. 131–4).
6. Cf. particularly P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (E.T. New York 1967), discussed by J. Rogerson, *Myth in O.T. Interpretation* (Berlin 1974), chap. 9.
7. Plato, *The Republic* 376–7.
8. Stählin, TDNT IV pp. 774ff. See also R. M. Grant, *The Earliest Lives of Jesus* (London 1961), pp. 121f. J. Creed, “Uses of Classical Mythology”, in Cunningham, pp. 7–15.
9. See Kirk, *Myth*, pp. 12–29; also Pannenberg, “Myth”, pp. 5ff; further references to the myth-ritual debate in B. S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London 1960), p. 19 n. 2 and discussion in Rogerson, chap. 6.
10. C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams and Reflection* (E.T. London 1963), p. 343; Kirk, *Myth*, p. 279. See also C. G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (E.T. London 1951).
11. Kirk, *Myth*, pp. 42–83; Rogerson, p. 105. See further e.g. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (E.T. New York 1963), chap. XI; E. Leach, *Lévi-Strauss* (Glasgow, revised 1974), chap. 4.
12. K. Jaspers, “Myth and Religion”, *Kerygma and Myth* II (ed. H. W. Bartsch, E.T. London 1962), p. 145.
13. M. Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* (London 1962), p. xvii, cites the following appropriate lines:  
*The intelligible forms of ancient poets,  
the fair humanities of old religion, . . .  
They live no longer in the faith of reason!  
But still the heart doth need a language, still  
Doth the old instinct bring back the old names . . .*
14. R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (E.T. Oxford 1923), p. 126. Cf. M. Eliade: “For all primitive mankind, it is religious experience which lays the foundation of the World” (*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (E.T. London 1960), p. 19).
15. Jung, *Memories*, p. 373; Kirk quotes Jung to similar effect: “The primitive mentality does not invent myths, it experiences them” (*Myth*, p. 279). See also N. Berdyayev, *Freedom and Spirit* (E.T. London 1935), p. 70.
16. Cf. N. Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (London 1973), ch. 3.
17. Thus, for example, the Gnostic myth reveals man’s consciousness of his divided nature (both mind and matter) and its frustrations, and Nietzsche’s “myth” of “superman” expresses a certain kind of aspiration, a “will to power”.
18. Cf. Pannenberg: “To attribute all phenomena, and especially particularly striking and extraordinary events, to the intervention of gods, neither presupposes ignorance, in every

- case, of the true relationship between cause and effect, nor is it comprehensible as the consequence of such ignorance. Rather, such a way of looking at things expresses the basic religious experience which apprehends the individual phenomenon not only in its association with other finite events and circumstances, but with reference to the 'powers' which determine reality as a whole. Without this specifically religious element even an ignorance of true causes would not explain why any event was attributed to a divine power" ("Myth", p. 14 n.32).
19. Stählin, TDNT IV, pp. 790f. See also R. M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (London revised 1965), pp. 62–8.
20. Cf. L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841, E.T. 1854, reprinted, New York 1957): "The specific object of faith is miracle; faith is the belief in miracle; faith and miracle are absolutely inseparable" (p. 126).
21. *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (E.T. 1846, 1 vol. 1892, reprinted, London 1973), pp. 39f. The influence of David Hume's still fundamental contribution to the debate is most clearly seen in Strauss's more constructive *New Life of Jesus* (E.T. London 1865): "It is absolutely impossible to conceive of a case in which the investigator of history will not find it more probable, beyond all comparison, that he has to deal with an untrue account, rather than with a miraculous fact" (Vol. I, p. 200).
22. Perhaps his most perceptive definition of myth is to be found in *New Life*, I p. 206: "The myth, in its original form, is not the conscious and intentional invention of an individual but a production of the common consciousness of a people or religious circle, which an individual does indeed first enunciate, but which meets with belief for the very reason that such individual is but the organ of this universal conviction. It is not a covering in which a clever man clothes an idea which arises in him for the use and benefit of the ignorant multitude, but it is only simultaneously with the narrative, nay, in the very form of the narrative which he tells, that he becomes conscious of the idea which he is not yet able to apprehend purely as such". See also the earlier formulation in *Life*, pp. 80ff. For a closer analysis of his concept of myth see P. C. Hodgson's Introduction to the 1973 reprint, pp. xxiii, xxvi, xxxivff.
23. *Life*, pp. 86f.
24. *Life*, §§ 95, 102, 107.
25. *Life*, §§ 71, 51.
26. See also the striking tribute to Strauss by A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (E.T. London 1910), p. 84.
27. This consideration is particularly relevant in studying the Fourth Gospel; but even in the Synoptics we must note the significance of such redactions as Matt. 13:58 of Mark 6:5f. and Matt. 14:32f. of Mark 6:51f., and of the manner in which Matthew and Luke make different points in narrating the same incident (Matt. 8:5–13/Luke 7:1–10).
28. Much more satisfactory is the definition of R. Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London 1970): "Miracle is an event of an extraordinary kind, brought about by a god, and of religious significance" (p. 1). His essay is chiefly a critique of Hume's definition on philosophical grounds.
29. See J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London 1975), ch. 4.
30. Cf. R. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (ed. H.-W. Bartsch, E.T. London 1953), p. 197.
31. Examples, including several well attested instances of these and other parapsychological phenomena may be found in H. Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (London 1952), and C. Wilson, *The Occult* (London 1971).
32. Recent attempts to speak of God while taking full cognisance of modern science in its various disciplines and to do so in an integrated way, include J. V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London 1972), Part One; J. W. Bowker, *The Sense of God* (Oxford 1973); M. Kelsey, *Encounter with God* (London 1974); Barbour, *Myths*. Many have found Karl Heim, *Christian Faith and Natural Science* (E.T. London 1953) helpful; also Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin* (E.T. London 1960).
33. See G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London 1973), pp. 69–78.
34. E. Trocmé, *Jesus and his Contemporaries* (E.T. London 1973), chapter 7.
35. Strauss, *Life*, §§92–93. See also H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden 1965), pp. 156–175.
36. Though he wavered on this point in the third edition of *Life*; see Hodgson, pp.xliif.

37. The authenticity of this logion as a word of the historical Jesus has been widely recognized; see e.g. R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (E.T. Oxford, 1963), pp. 23f; R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (London 1965), pp. 128f. Strauss's own interpretation in *New Life*, I p. 364 is wholly unconvincing: the miracles to which Jesus appeals "are to be understood in a spiritual sense of the moral effects of his doctrine".
38. See e.g. the suggestion of R. Otto, *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man* (E.T. London 1938), pp. 368–74.
39. Strauss, *Life*, §§148–151. Instead of an individual at the centre of christology Strauss placed an idea – H. Harris, *David Friedrich Strauss and his Theology* (Cambridge 1973), p. 55.
40. See Kümmel, *New Testament*, pp. 245ff.
41. See P. Vielhauer in E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (E.T. ed. R. M. Wilson, London 1965) Vol. II, pp. 587–90; D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London 1964), 122–7.
42. See particularly K. Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (E.T. London 1972), chapter 6.
43. J. F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (London 1966), falls into the error of attempting to interpret Revelation literally.
44. Kümmel, *New Testament*, pp. 250ff. See also 1 Pet. 3:19f., Jude 6, 14f.
45. Cf. W. G. Kümmel, "Mythische Rede und Heilsgeschehen im Neuen Testament", *Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte* (Marburg 1965), pp. 161ff.
46. See particularly R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* Vol. I (E.T. London 1952), pp. 164–83; *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* (E.T. London 1956), pp. 162–71, 189–208.
47. See particularly C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* Göttingen 1961); E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (London 1973); cf. J. W. Drane (p. 123 above).
48. See J. D. G. Dunn, "1 Corinthians 15.45 – Last Adam, Life-giving Spirit", *Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament: Studies in Honour of C. F. D. Moule* (ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley; Cambridge 1973), pp. 129f, 135f; also *Jesus and the Spirit*, ch. 10.
49. See e.g. R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (E.T. Oxford 1963), pp. 241, 371; H. Koester, "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels", in J. M. Robinson and H. Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia 1971), pp. 187–93; R. P. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter 1972), chap. VI; E. Trocmé, *Jesus and his Contemporaries* (E.T. London 1973), chap. 7.
50. See e.g. Bultmann, *Theology* I, pp. 140ff, 148ff.
51. For description and critique see particularly G. Wagner, *Rauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries* (E.T. Edinburgh 1967).
52. See e.g. E. Käsemann, "The Pauline Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," *Essays on New Testament Themes* (E.T. London 1964), pp. 108ff. But see also Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London 1970), Part III.
53. See e.g. A. Drews, *Die Christusmythe* (Jena 1910); P. L. Couchoud, *The Enigma of Jesus* (E.T. London 1924); G. A. Wells, *The Jesus of the Early Christians* (London 1971). But see also M. Goguel, *Jesus the Nazarene – Myth or History?* (E.T. London 1926); H. G. Wood, *Did Christ Really Live?* (London 1938).
54. Cited by H. Schlier, "The New Testament and Myth", *The Relevance of the New Testament* (E.T. London 1967), p. 84.
55. Schlier, p. 92. Cf. A. Harnack: "In Christ the principal figure of all myths has become history", cited by G. Miegge, *Gospel and Myth in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (E.T. London 1960), p. 106. To be sure, the concepts of Christ's pre-existence and virginal conception can justifiably be described as "mythical" (cf. Kümmel, *Heilsgeschehen*, p. 155, 165f); but even here we should note that "the idea of the incarnation . . . is contrary to the nature of myth itself" (Pannenberg, "Myth", pp. 71f).
56. O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (E.T. London 1967), pp. 139ff.
57. Each of these observations can be illustrated from the classic expression of Liberal Protestantism, A. Harnack's *What is Christianity?* (E.T. London 1901, reprinted 1958); see

- particularly Lectures 2, 3 and 10. It is noticeable that Weiss, Heitmüller and Bousset remained firmly entrenched within Liberal Protestantism at this central point; see J. Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (E.T. London 1971), p. 135 (also Introduction pp. 16–24); Kümmel, *New Testament*, pp. 230ff, 255ff, 259ff; Koch, *Apocalyptic*, p. 59.
58. Kümmel, *New Testament*, n. 466; see also Miegge, *Gospel*, pp. 119ff; J. M. Robinson, "The Pre-History of Demythologization", *Interpretation* 20 (1966), pp. 68f; W. Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (E.T. London 1968), p. 250; Johnson, pp. 103–14.
59. "New Testament and Mythology", E.T. in *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 1–44; subsequent page references in the text are to this essay.
60. Pannenberg, "Myth", p. 9. See also Johnson, pp. 141–151.
61. See also Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London 1960), p. 37.
62. But see Part I above. K. Barth comments, "What kind of myth is it that recognizes the existence only of the human subject, and so requires an exclusively existentialist and anthropological interpretation?" (*Kerygma and Myth* II, p. 116); see also I. Henderson, *Myth in the New Testament* (London 1952), pp. 30ff – "the non-homogeneous character of the mythical" (p. 52). Bultmann would presumably justify the claim on the grounds that the subject-object distinction and so the possibility of consciously standing apart from the world is a modern development beginning with Descartes (cf. Schmithals, *Bultmann*, pp. 29ff.). Existentialism overcomes this subject-object pattern and so enables post-Cartesian scientific man to get inside pre-Cartesian and particularly NT (mythical) thought. See also F. Gogarten, *Demythologizing and History* (E.T. London 1955), pp. 48–68 – particularly valuable for his warning against an unjustified attack on Bultmann's theology as "subjectivist".
63. See also J. Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (London 1955), pp. 14–21.
64. "This is what is meant by 'faith': to open ourselves freely to the future" (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 19).
65. Cf. Bultmann, *Theology* I, pp. 305f. See also Schmithals, *Bultmann*, chapters 6 and 8: "The Christian Easter faith is not interested in the historical question because it is interested in the resurrection of Jesus as saving event, that is as an existential experience" (p. 138). "It is the Word that makes the Jesus-event the saving event"; "apart from this proclamation the Jesus-event is just an ordinary earthly event" (pp. 174, 193).
66. "The Christological Confession of the World Council of Churches", *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (E.T. London 1955), pp. 280f.
67. Here Bultmann acknowledges his debt to his teacher W. Herrmann (*Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 200f); but influential statements on the same theme had been made by Kierkegaard, M. Kähler and of course Barth.
68. See particularly his comments on 1 Cor. 15:3–8 (*Kerygma and Myth* p. 39); and below. Cf. his earlier essay, "What does it mean to speak of God?" (1925), *Faith and Understanding* (E.T. London 1969), pp. 53–65.
69. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 197; *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 19; "On the Problem of Demythologizing", *New Testament Issues* (ed. R. Batey; London 1970), p. 41; also his reply to H. P. Owen in *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (ed. C. W. Kegley, London 1966) p. 261. See also H. P. Owen, *Revelation and Existence: a Study in the Theology of Rudolph Bultmann* (Cardiff 1957): "Demythologizing would be more accurately called deobjectifying" (p. 15); Schmithals, *Bultmann*, chapter 2; "The basic error of all theology, even of faith itself . . . – God's action is objectified" (p. 141); and particularly Johnson, *Origins*, pp. 14f and *passim*, who notes the important influence of H. Jonas on Bultmann's understanding of myth and of "objectivation" (pp. 114–26, 207–31).
70. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 84; see also *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 210f.
71. Miegge, *Gospel*, p. 93.
72. R. W. Hepburn, "Demythologizing and the Problem of Validity", *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (ed. A. Flew and A. Macintyre; London 1955), pp. 229f; see also e.g. Kümmel, "Mythos im Neuen Testament", *Heilsgeschehen*, p. 221; J. Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing* (London 1960), pp. 198ff; but see also S. M. Ogden's more sympathetic comments in Kegley, *Bultmann*, pp. 111–6.
73. *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 196f; *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, pp. 68f; *New Testament*

*Issues*, p. 42. But see Macquarrie's comment, *Demythologizing*, p. 205 n. 1.

74. P. S. Minear, "The Cosmology of the Apocalypse", *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder; London 1962), pp. 32f; "Certainly we cannot accuse him of holding a naive three-storied idea of the physical world. There is nothing naive about his wrestling with the dilemmas of human existence" (p. 34).

75. Cf. Bultmann, *Theology I*, §§21ff. G. Bornkamm characterizes the heresy which Paul attacks in Colossians as an attempt "to gain access to the gospel by way of myth" – "Myth and Gospel: A Discussion of the Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Message", *Kerygma and History* (ed. C. E. Braaten and R. A. Harrisville, Nashville 1962), p. 181.

76. Cf. F. F. Bruce, "The Kerygma of Hebrews", *Interpretation* 23 (1969), pp. 9ff.

77. Cf. Barth, *Kerygma and Myth II*, pp. 115f.

78. H. Braun, "The Meaning of New Testament Christology", *J. Th.Ch.* 5 (New York, 1968), pp. 117f.

79. F. Buri, *Kerygma und Mythos II* (ed. H. W. Bartsch, Hamburg 1952), pp. 85ff: "The kerygma is a last vestige of mythology to which we still illogically cling" (p. 96). See also Macquarrie, *Demythologizing*, chapter 5.

80. S. M. Ogden, *Christ without Myth* (New York 1961), pp. 76–94, 111–16; Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (London 1967), pp. 139–46; see also Jaspers, *Kerygma and Myth II* pp. 173f.

81. A. Kee, *The Way of Transcendence* (Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. xvi–xxii.

82. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 43. On Bultmann's concern to remove the false skandalon of first century mythology from the gospel, see Schmithals, *Bultmann*, pp. 255f.

83. "Does the New Testament embody a truth which is quite independent of its mythical setting? If it does, theology must undertake the task of stripping the Kerygma from its mythical framework, of 'demythologizing' it" (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 3). Note also the *a priori* distinction between "the other worldly" and "this world", etc. in the definition on p. 10 n. 2 (cited above p. 297).

84. "The word of preaching confronts us as the word of God. It is not for us to question its credentials" (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 41); see also his reply to Jaspers, (*Kerygma and Myth II*, p. 190), and Schmithals, *Bultmann*, pp. 193f.

85. See e.g. Barth and R. Schnackenburg in *Kerygma and Myth II*, pp. 91–102, 340–9.

86. This is not to deny that Bultmann wishes to say something about "the historical event of Jesus Christ"; but to describe it only as "the eschatological event . . . only present as address" (Bultmann's reply to Ogden in Kegley, *Bultmann*, pp. 272f) neither meets Ogden's criticism nor says enough about Jesus.

87. "If the event of Easter Day is in any sense an historical event additional to the event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord, since it was this faith which led to the apostolic preaching" (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 42). Barth comments: "The real life of Jesus Christ is confined to the kerygma and to faith" (*Kerygma and Myth II*, p. 101). Similarly Bornkamm: "Jesus Christ has become a mere saving fact and ceases to be a person" (*Kerygma and History*, p. 186).

88. Cf. Kümmel, *Heilsgeschehen*, pp. 157–65, 228f; see also Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (E.T. London 1951, revised 1962), pp. 94–106; *Salvation in History* pp. 136–50; H. Ott, "Rudolf Bultmann's Philosophy of History" in Kegley, *Bultmann*, p. 58 (note Bultmann's response, p. 264).

89. Macquarrie's position in effect in *Demythologizing*, pp. 93, 98f, 224, and in his concept of "Christhood" in *Principles of Christian Theology* (London 1966).

90. Note particularly that 1 Cor. 15:12ff seems to be specifically directed against such a reduction of resurrection hope to the "now" of present religious experience (cf. 1 Cor. 4:8); see Dunn, "1 Corinthians 15:45", pp. 127f. Cf. W. Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man* (E.T. London 1968), pp. 106ff; J. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (E.T. London 1967), chapter 3. Similar criticism would have to be levelled against Bultmann's reduction of the future imminent expectation of Jesus' own message to the crisis of the eschatological "now" of decision (*Jesus and the Word* (E.T. London 1934, reprinted 1958), pp. 44–7).

91. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, pp. 33f, 80f.

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92. Against Bultmann's arbitrary attempts to attribute such passages to the anonymous "ecclesiastical redactor" – *The Gospel of John* (E.T. Oxford 1971).
93. Kümmel, *Heilsgeschehen*, pp. 156f, 160, 164, 225ff. Cf. Plato's distinction between *mythos* and *logos* above (p. 286); and J. Knox, *The Death of Christ* (London 1959, reprinted 1967), pp. 146ff; also *Myth and Truth* (London 1966), chapters 2 and 3.

## EXEGESIS IN PRACTICE: TWO EXAMPLES

For essential principles and methods:

O. KAISER and W. G. KÜMMEL, *Exegetical Method: a Student's Handbook* (New York: Seabury 1967), pp. 35–48.

For the “tools” required for NT exegesis:

F. W. DANKER, *Multi-purpose Tools for Bible Study* (St Louis: Concordia 1970<sup>3</sup>). Includes essays on how to use the major tools of biblical exegesis.

R. T. FRANCE (ed.), *A Bibliographical Guide to New Testament Research* (Cambridge: Tyndale Fellowship, 1974<sup>2</sup>).

W. G. KÜMMEL, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM Press 1975<sup>2</sup>), pp. 23–28: “The Most Important Tools for the Study of the New Testament”.

D. M. SCHOLER, *A Basic Bibliographical Guide for New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1973<sup>2</sup>).

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I. G. BARBOUR, *Myths, Models and Paradigms* (London: SCM Press 1974).  
On the diverse functions of language.

H.-W. BARTSCH (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth* (translated and edited by R. H. Fuller; Vol. I, London: SPCK 1953; Vol. II, 1962; both volumes combined, 1972). Contains Bultmann's famous essay “The New Testament and Mythology” together with other contributions to the debate it sparked off.

C. E. BRAATEN and R. A. HARRISVILLE (eds), *Kerygma and History* (Nashville: Abingdon 1962). Includes several essays on myth in the NT.

R. BULTMANN, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM Press 1960). Popular lectures delivered in English in USA.

A. CUNNINGHAM (ed.), *The Theory of Myth: Six Studies* (London 1973). University of Lancaster Colloquium – includes papers on Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas.

I. HENDERSON, *Myth in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press 1952). A still useful critique of Bultmann.

R. W. HEPBURN, “Demythologizing and the Problem of Validity”, in *New*



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- G. S. KIRK, *Myth: Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures*, (Cambridge University Press 1970). A classical scholar tackles the wider questions of myth, particularly the anthropological theories of C. Lévi-Strauss.
- W. G. KÜMMEL, "Mythische Rede und Heilsgeschehen im Neuen Testament", and "Mythos im Neuen Testament", in *Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte* (Marburg: N. G. Elert 1965). Approaches the problem from a "salvation-history" standpoint.
- J. MACQUARRIE, *The Scope of Demythologizing* (London: SCM Press 1960). A valuable assessment of the debate to date of writing; perhaps Macquarrie's best work.
- G. MIEGGE, *Gospel and Myth in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (London: Lutterworth Press 1960). An Italian Waldensian's contribution.
- S. M. OGDEN, *Christ without Myth* (New York: Harper and Row 1961). Perhaps the single most penetrating critique of Bultmann.
- W. PANNENBERG, "The Later Dimensions of Myth in Biblical and Christian Tradition", in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 3 (London: SCM Press 1973). A review of approaches to the problem, particularly in biblical scholarship.
- J. W. ROGERSON, *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation* (Berlin: de Gruyter 1974). Describes how the concept of myth has been used in OT interpretation since the end of late 18th century, including chapters on Lévi-Strauss and Paul Ricoeur.
- G. STÄHLIN, art, *mythos*, in TDNT 4, pp. 762–795.
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## CHAPTER XVI

### THE NEW HERMENEUTIC

- P. J. ACHTEMEIER, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1969).
- E. BETTI, *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen; J. C. B. Mohr 1972<sup>2</sup>).