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Mythopoeia and Myth in Psalm 82

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.” —Edmund Burke, author and philosopher

PSALM 82 IS WIDELY considered a mythical text.¹ Its style encourages the exploration of boundaries in divine and human realms, probing the roles of agency and nature of the relationship between the two aspects. As descriptions of divine rulership in literature often reflect human experience, so the mythical features of this text provide insight into the priorities of human agency by means of descriptions of the divine. This insight is evidence of implicit ethics in the text. Following Zimmermann’s *Organon* model, the mythical features that reveal human priorities of the “ought” contribute to the justification of an overall ethical reading of Psalm 82.

In a mythological text, there are multiple layers to consider. Broadly, in this approach, a myth is a story that can cross realms (i.e. divine and human) as well as cross aspect (i.e. narrative and metanarrative). What this means specifically for securing a definition of myth will be sorted by first reviewing a history of approaches to myth, and then followed by a description of how portions of the Hebrew Bible have been treated as myth and how Psalm 82 fits in that category.

Psalm 82 will be read as a mythic text to see what themes surface and assess how those themes align with the overarching thesis that the composer includes intentional ambiguity, both linguistically and thematically, in order to engage a broad audience in thinking about ethics for the poor and the leaders who are failing them. Also, the mythological provenance of Psalm 82 provides support for the *Organon* model discussed in Chapter One, by which various aspects of a text contribute toward support of an ideal. In this study, we are exploring evidence of implicit ethics in Psalm 82.

1. The title of Morgenstern’s groundbreaking thesis, *The Mythological Provenance of Psalm 82*, likely influenced this perspective.

The mythical nature of Psalm 82 provides accessibility for a broad audience to engage with the implicit ethical message of the composition. This will be explored further as Psalm 82 is considered in conversation with other ancient Near Eastern mythological texts.

In this chapter, Psalm 82 will be read alongside the *Epic of Aqhat*, a mythical literary text from Ugarit that has been noted for its inclusion of ethical ideas and has been mentioned in connection with themes in Psalm 82.² Both texts contain themes of justice advocacy for humans who are at the mercy of powerful deities. Both maintain a concern for keeping order for the poor. But, the difference between these two texts is great. While Psalm 82 is a short poem, the *Epic of Aqhat* is a lengthy poetic narrative. This study will attempt to reason through the connections and determine how Psalm 82 engages with ancient Near Eastern mythopoeic thought as a means of describing what is right and wrong in the world, asking also if ambiguity is a natural feature of mythopoeia. It is an exploration of mythical literature as a context for communicating ethical concerns that are shared by humanity across time and space.

Background of Scholarship on Myth

For many decades, scholars have speculated about myth. Is it a literary genre? Is it a science? Is it a story from another time and space with different cosmic rules? What makes myth so fascinating is that it developed in this world, in the same space time continuum that we inhabit today, yet myths tend to function in a seeming alternate reality.

Defining Mythic Literature

Myth is a label which often categorizes ancient narratives and poetry that tell a story which operates outside witnessed human experience. For example, a mythic story sometimes describes tangible interactions between deities and humans, a phenomenon that does not fit into a modern category of experience. Therefore, ancient myths are often received in a modern world as something other than a record of historical events. This has spurred a series of reflections on how myth should be viewed from anthropological, scientific, philosophical, literary, and religious perspectives.

2. Though some scholars, like Parker and Smith, have made connections between Psalm 82 and Ugaritic literature, a full comparison of the psalm with an epic has not been played out.

In the nineteenth century, predominant views described myth as a precursor to science, eventually replaced by scientific method and thought. Some thought that myth should be read as literal descriptions of the world by the ancients, ignorant of science.³ Others believed the ancients were intentionally speculating about the world in allegorical terms for a purpose other than science.⁴ Both views speculate about the origination of myth in human thought, and both views recognize ancient humans as the source of myth.

In the first view, ritual grows out of the myth because the myth is considered a literal representation of how ancients saw the world they lived in. In the second view, the ritual inspires the myth and over time the myth reminds people of an older ritual. An example of this is the burning of effigies rather than humans in some pre-modern and modern pagan religious practices. The first view, credited to E. B. Tylor, considers the ancient world as unknowledgeable and sees myth as a way of describing the world that is locked in a particular time and place.⁵ The second allows for myth to supplement scientific thought, making two things possible: 1) myth can be created in any era, and 2) myth contains allegory and metaphor.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, philosophies about myth began to consider intelligent and intentional design by the ancients. Ernst Cassirer attempted to classify myth as a way of thinking about the world which is altogether incompatible with science. He believed myth to be modern and that the ideas presented were meant to be challenged.⁶ In the mid-twentieth century, Henri Frankfort and his wife Henriette Antonia Frankfort furthered this idea by applying a term to describe mythic thought: 'mythopoeia'.⁷

The Frankforts wrote about mythopoeia as what they called *primitive thought* in contrast to (modern) *philosophical thought*. Whereas philosophical thinking is abstract, critical and unemotional, primitive (mythopoeic)

3. Segal's *Brief Introduction to Myth* gives a categorical description of premodern and modern views about myth. In this, he proposed E. B. Tylor as the originator of the view in which myth is considered a literal description by ancients of their world and its happenings. Some other followed, including Bronislaw Malinowski, and to some extent Max Müller. Segal, *Myth*.

4. i.e. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*; Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*.

5. Though Tylor (who is credited with originating this idea) was critiqued for not being able to envision an era of postmodern science, postmodernism may provide further support for Tylor's argument. Segal, *Myth*.

6. Segal, *Myth*, 38–39.

7. Frankfort and Frankfort, *Before Philosophy*.

thought is concrete, uncritical and emotional.⁸ Mythopoeia imagines a world in personal relationship with the human and subject. The Frankforts describe an “I–Thou” relationship, recognizing mutual relational qualities between the earth and all its inhabitants. In contrast to modern philosophy, which they describe as detached and intellectual, mythopoeia is involved and emotional. Whereas philosophy distinguishes between the subjective and the objective, mythopoeia distinguishes between appearance and reality. An example of the I–Thou relationship is love.⁹ It is emotional and connected. The Frankforts contrasted the modern scientific person who sees the world externally (as ‘it’) with the ancient primitive one who sees the world in a connected way (as ‘thou’).¹⁰

The Frankforts made sense of ancient Near Eastern literature that has been often casually labeled as mythic by defining the philosophical context for mythology as mythopoeia. Mythological texts are initially an expression of mythopoeic thought. Many scholars also look more specifically at the literature of the Hebrew Bible to explore the context of a mythopoeic tradition. Myth scholar Segal defended a shift from the mythopoeic to the philosophical that begins with Hebrew literature: the ancients “lived in a wholly mythopoeic world. The move from mythopoeic to philosophical thinking began with the Israelites, who fused many gods into one god and placed that god outside of nature.”¹¹ However, Segal’s argument is difficult to uphold as the idea that the Israelites sought worship of God outside of or apart from nature is unfounded. Not least of all, nature is connected with the divine in the Psalter and the prophets, where there is also evidence of mythopoeic thought.¹² This chapter looks for a connection between the Hebrew Psalter and the mythic texts of Ugarit as evidence of shared values expressed in mythopoeic thought.

A mythopoeic reading of Psalm 82 leans into the understanding that all subjects and subject matter of the poem are connected. The divine beings are not ethereal but involved. The poor and disadvantaged are affected by those who wield power over life and nature, and the land itself shares a relationship with everyone living upon her and suffers for the sake of injustice.

8. Frankfort and Frankfort, *Before Philosophy*, 10–11.

9. Frankfort and Frankfort, *Before Philosophy*, 12–13. Segal, *Myth*, 41.

10. Frankfort and Frankfort, *Before Philosophy*, 4.

11. Segal, *Myth*, 42. Segal’s view aligns with some of the twentieth-century scholarship that attempts to interpret Psalm 82 as descriptive of a shift from monotheism to polytheism. See chapter one for more details.

12. Consider Ps 74 and Isa 27, for example.

Myth in the Hebrew Bible

Before Psalm 82 is evaluated for mythical themes, it is essential to examine the scholarship that has already been produced on the topic of myth in the Hebrew Bible. Describing Psalm 82 as mythic includes the psalm in a category of literature that has been treated broadly without adherence to any strict definition. Myth in the Hebrew Bible has been explored in numerous ways over the past century. In as much as myth has been a subject of consideration for ancient ways of thinking and storytelling, scholars have attempted to make sense of how mythic paradigms do and do not fit within the Hebrew Bible.

In the mid-twentieth century, John L. McKenzie responded to the wide acceptance of the statement that there is no myth in the Hebrew Bible.¹³ To engage a new approach, McKenzie appealed to defining myth as a type of literature in which patterns may be seen to have commonalities with other mythic texts outside of the Hebrew Bible corpus, acknowledging that “there is no generally accepted definition, and the forms of expression covered by the term [myth] are too diversified to be easily brought together.”¹⁴

Herbert Gordon May also tackled the subject of myth in the Hebrew Bible in the mid-twentieth century, defending a method that seeks to find patterns connecting stories from the Hebrew Bible to historical events in the ancient Near East as well as other literary references. May cited parallels between the story of David and Goliath as mythic representations of order and chaos in mythic literature from Ugarit and Assyria.¹⁵ This method of reading Hebrew Bible texts with other ancient Near Eastern texts to explore themes and shared cultural values is useful for the following study of Psalm 82 and Ugaritic epic literature.

Most recently, a volume edited by Dexter E. Callender, Jr., attempted to define myth in the Hebrew Bible as it relates to the text as scripture. Callender’s approach presumes myth as an “established category in the academic humanities,” and the bulk of the volume is devoted to describing how scripture can be defined in such a way as to reconcile certain Hebrew Bible passages that have been identified as mythic with their role as sacred scripture.¹⁶ This approach may be useful for religious readings of the text,

13. McKenzie claimed to be responding to Gunkel’s view of an absence of myth in the Hebrew Bible. He drew on ideas about myth presented by Cassirer and Eliade to discuss the nature of mythology beyond the scope of genre category in order to flesh out artistic approaches to interpretation. McKenzie, *Myths and Realities*, 265.

14. McKenzie, *Myths and Realities*, 267.

15. May, “A Sociological Approach,” 98–106.

16. Note that this volume does not engage with theories of myth and it does not

but it does not get to the heart of determining how and why a text fits with mythical provenance in the ancient Near East. More specific to myth in psalmody, Dirk Human's *Psalms and Mythology* volume explored various specific interpretations of mythic influence in the Hebrew Bible Psalter. This volume demonstrated that there are a variety of approaches to defining myth in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷

Myth is often conceptualized as any story that contains a supernatural agent. This is related to an idea about reading parts of Genesis as myth. This is also the case in the book of Job, where a divine council meets to discuss the fate of one human. When a supernatural agent is present in the literature that cannot be explained in historical terms, the term myth seems to be applied. However, the term myth is not often (if at all) applied to Hebrew Bible texts where a prophet interacts with the supernatural (i.e. Elijah goes up in a chariot of fire, or Ezekiel's visions). This predetermination about texts that may or may not be read as mythical is a barrier to understanding the nature of myth in ancient texts. Certain biblical texts are not considered mythical even though they share commonalities with other texts. For example, the description of Isaiah, as he is approached by an otherworldly being who purifies his mouth with burning coals, carries a high sacred factor as evidence of the calling of a prophet. It is not, however, dealt with as mythical, even though it aligns with the criteria of containing a supernatural agent.

Myth is also described as participatory. A mythic text is one by means of which a reader may engage themselves in the activity of a text, an aspect that myth has in common with liturgy.¹⁸ C. S. Lewis addressed the nature of myth, describing myth as a story that is experienced, prompting contemplation by the reader who must then participate in the action of the text. The myth is defined by its ability to affect a reader and act upon the "conscious imagination" in order to appropriate a response.¹⁹ G. K. Chesterton also described the influence of myth in a similar way. He claimed that a mythic text invites a reader to participate in the action of the text by imagining himself or herself within the construct. Chesterton referred to myth as evidence of a search for meaning. In Chesterton's view, the myth departs from the religious leader who says "these things are" and introduces the voice of a dreamer and idealist crying out "why cannot these things be?"²⁰ The engagement of an audience becomes part of the process

include Psalm 82. Callender, *Myth and Scripture*.

17. Human, *Psalms and Mythology*.

18. This is a discussion developed in Chapter 6.

19. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 45–47.

20. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 102.

by which meaning in a myth is shaped. Encouraging reader participation also informs the ethical shape of a myth.

Myth can also act as ritual drama. Myths can be audience-centered when they are acted out to communicate virtues for religious or cultural importance. Purtilt explained a dual purpose for ancient myth in his work about mythic context in religion. Ancient myths were thought of as stories that were intended to honor the gods and heroes they portray as well as inspire their listeners, while the audience received the stories as a source for moral and religious lessons.²¹ This view particularly supports the idea of reading mythic literature as a source of implicit ethics in ancient societies.

The Problem with Myth

This study seeks to further the research by exploring aspects of mythology that may be useful for interpretation and shed light on reading Psalm 82 ethically. Rather than quarantine the identity of deities in Psalm 82, this study explores the relationship between the divine and human realms in light of a concern for order and justice by caring for the poor. The nature of mythology and aspects of a mythic text are explored as a means by which both divine agency and human agency are compared and contrasted in the psalm. The study also considers how mythology can access and describe divine realms while directing implication for human agency, thus leading to the possibility of reading Psalm 82 as implicitly ethical. For this reason, mythology will serve as a means by which the agency of divine entities and human entities may be explored to determine how a mythical text may include an ethical paradigm for human consumption.

One major problem with exploring myth in Psalm 82 is that myth and the Hebrew Bible have a historically difficult relationship, and while some psalms have traditionally been identified as mythic, it is not a common interpretive approach in biblical studies. In the few recent works identifying mythology in the Hebrew Bible, Psalm 82 is rarely included and not adequately explored. By 1995, Parker had already declared “it is remarkable that Psalm 82 is not cited in various recent studies of myth in the Bible.”²² Since then, scholarship on myth has continued to exclude Psalm 82, likely due to the difficulties already noted.²³ In works that have looked more deeply at mythology particular to the Psalter, Psalm 82 is often merely referenced and it is suggested that there is room for further

21. Purtilt, *J.R.R. Tolkien*.

22. Parker, “The Beginning of the Reign of God,” 542.

23. Callender, *Myth and Scripture*. Human, *Psalms and Mythology*.

work to be done.²⁴ The way that scholars refer to myth also varies widely as does its use for interpretation. There is no clear consensus on what it means for a Hebrew Bible text to be mythic.

The term *mythological* is, itself by nature polysemous, often used in a variety of ways. John W. Rogerson, who wrote on the subject of myth in the Hebrew Bible several decades ago, pointed to the problem of scholarship that is unable to determine an all-encompassing definition of myth.²⁵ Current biblical scholarship seems to be talking past itself instead of directly conversing about the nature of myth or mythic texts in the Bible. Groenewald attempted to address this issue by claiming that myth is an important theological medium, the use of which has not been sufficiently worked out; he recognized the main problem as “a great deal of debate among scholars concerning a single definition of ‘myth.’”²⁶ This has led to a variety of presumptive attitudes toward mythological texts in the Hebrew Bible, when it comes to interpretation and critique. This divergence may be demonstrated by examining two chapters in Dirk Human’s recent edited volume, *Psalms and Mythology*.²⁷

Flip Schutte, in “Myth as a Paradigm to Read a Text,”²⁸ introduced the topic of myth with a psychoanalytical flavor, describing myth as a mentality perspective or mental paradigm. He explained this paradigm as a functional backdrop against which to read the Psalms in order to discover time and culture-bound realities.²⁹ By this means, uncomfortable passages may be more simply explained away as metaphors bound within a particular time and culture. Schutte defended this as a way of eliminating discomfort for the reader so that they may avoid an existential crisis of faith and “well-being.”³⁰ Myth, according Schutte, is folklore preceded by a process of imagination, *vis a vis* symbols or language that make sense to a people within a particular time. In his view, myth is a type of language which attempts to capture and express an experience of God by a human audience in a particular time and place.

Myth by this definition is not allegorical, but tautegorical, meaning myth may be only defined according to standards within a subset culture specific to the time and place of its origin. Schutte described myth as a container

24. Human, *Psalms and Mythology*.

25. Rogerson, *Myth*, 173.

26. Groenewald, “Mythology,” 18.

27. Human, *Psalms and Mythology*.

28. Schutte, “Myth as a Paradigm.”

29. Schutte, “Myth as a Paradigm,” 2.

30. Schutte, “Myth as a Paradigm,” 3–4.