MYTHOPOETIC LANGUAGE IN THE PSALMS

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In appreciating the mythopoetic language of the OT one need
not view the authors as so culturally primitive that they appro-
priated mythical categories because that was the only way they
knew how to articulate their understanding of divine reality. To
show this one must distinguish between myth and mythology.
The contexts prove the authors were not committed to myth but
were keenly aware of contemporaneous mythology from which
they drew colorful figures to enrich their theological expression.
The greatest extra biblical mythological corpus comes from Ras
Shamra and dates from the mid-second millennium.[1] The many
linguistic and cultural continuities between Ugaritic and the Bible
make it reasonable to assume the god-language of the Canaanites
and Israel was related. Our purpose in this essay is not to claim
the Canaanite religion of Palestine was the same as that in Uga-
ritic or that Hebrew religion grew out of Canaanite but to ex-
amine exactly how the religious terminology was related. W. F.
Albright at the time of his death saw this relationship as purely
linguistic. It was on that note that I closed an earlier article on
"The Mythological Elements in the Book of Job."[2]

I will now attempt to deal realistically with this question as it
relates to the Psalms. In Job we saw something that does not
appear in the Psalms: direct reference to the pagan myths as in
3:8, ". . . the cursers . . . who are ready to arouse Leviathan,"
and 7:12, "Am I Yam or Tanin that you set a guard over me?"

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[1] Similar alphabetic cuneiform texts have been found in Palestine dating
from the close of the late Bronze Age. Although they are not mythological
they show how widespread the culture of Ugarit was and this adds weight
to the conclusion that the mythology of Ugarit was not local. Cf. F. M.
Cross, "The Canaanite Cuneiform Tablet from Taanach," BASOR 190
(April 1968) 41-46. Also see "A Phoenician Inscription in Ugaritic Script
Discovered at Sarepta," JANESCU 8 (1976) 49-57.

[2] WTJ 40 (1977-78) 213-228.

What does appear in the Psalms are idiomatic metaphors (cf. Job 5:7 where "Resheph's sons soar aloft"--a reference to "arrows" or "sparks" or "lightning") and conscious demythologizing as in Job 9 and 26 where the mythic terms served to show how the God of Job is both a unique and a supreme cosmic being. With regard to Job chapters 40 and 41 we suggested that mythic language was also used as a convenient vehicle to describe Yahweh's power over the forces of evil. We noted how Job's firm monotheism is clearly expressed (cf. chapter 31) and the same is true of the Psalms. The keynote of this theme is Ps 96:5: "For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens." The psalmists also tend to be polemical about their monotheism (cf. Ps 121) but they never hesitate to use mythological terminology for graphic vividness (cf. Ps 18:10, 68:4, etc.). This mythopoetic language is most evident in the three great poetic masterpieces of the Bible, Job, Psalms, and Isaiah.

The developmental hypothesis, a major theme of Wellhausenism, saw all mythic language as one more proof of the evolution of Yahwism. Polytheism and henotheism were stages in the development of Israel's religion leading up to the great writing prophets and especially Second Isaiah with his lofty monotheism. In its early stages Israel's religion was considered to be much like its neighbors'--although many recent redaction critics claim that it is virtually impossible to tell what pre-exilic Israelite religion really was.[3]

G. E. Wright's *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* questioned this evolution of the Old Testament concept of God. By showing how Canaanite religion had high cosmic gods in the mid-2nd millennium, Wright made a good case for a unique theology in early Israel. That unique something in early Israel he called the Israelite "mutation" or a radical revolution as opposed to a gradual evolution. It was not entirely explainable by the empirical data. To quote Prof. Wright:

> Israelite knowledge of God was not founded in the first instance on the numinous awareness of nature--it was based

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[3] H. H. Rowley (*The Re-Discovery of the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946] 74) claimed polytheism was originally part of Yahwism but that gradually "the more ignoble ideas" were discredited and other ideas "were assimilated, and either divested of meaning, or related to the higher religion."

on historical event. . . . The problem of life was seen by Israel not as an integration with forces of nature, but as an adjustment to the will of the God who had chosen them.[4]

In our interpretation of the OT a distinction must be made between what was considered normative (official) and actual practices. Religious syncretism was a continuing process which the biblical account attests to. Figurines of the fertility goddess were often in the hands of the Israelites. A recently discovered 7th century inscription reads, "Yahweh and his Asherah."[5] But this only shows the extent of the syncretism. Officially according to the Old Testament, God is sexless. There was no mythology --no word for goddess. The writers of Scripture consistently call female deities by their proper names. Even the above-mentioned 7th-century inscription does the same. Israelite religion then at its worst had no nature myths but at its best it did not hesitate to use the language of the Canaanite myths. For example, in Ps 74:12-14 the mythopoetic language about the many-headed Leviathan is historicized and used metaphorically to describe Yahweh's great victory in history, at the Red Sea. The monster here is Egypt.

But you, 0 God, are my king from of old;
  you bring salvation upon the earth.
It was you who split open the sea by your
      power;
  you broke the heads of the monster in the
      waters.
It was you who crushed the heads of
  Leviathan
and gave him as food to the creatures of
  the desert.

The same is true of Isa 27:1 where again the mythic chaos figure Leviathan is historicized to represent the final evil power in the Endtime. It is important to stress that this terminology in Mesopotamian and Canaanite myth is always tied to natural phenomena, never to historical events. This probably explains

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[4] *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (SBT 2 ; Naperville, Ill., Alec R. Allenson, 1957) 22-23.

[5] *Kuntillet Ajrud: A Religions Centre from the Time of the Judean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai by Zeev Meshel* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, Spertus Hall, Spring 1978, Cat. No. 175) 13, 14.

why the biblical creation account is so emphatically anti-mythical in its language--to stress it as historical event. Von Rad has noted how the proper names for the sun and moon are avoided because they were so important in the myths.[6] The same resistance to mythic terminology does not apply to known events in history nor to the climax of history--the Endtime. So Isaiah 26:26-27:1 says:

> See, the Lord is coming out of his dwelling
>   to punish the people of the earth for their
>   sins,
> The earth will disclose the blood shed upon her
>   She will conceal her slain no longer.
> In that day,
> The Lord will punish with his sword,
>   his fierce, great and powerful sword,
> Leviathan the gliding serpent,
>   Leviathan the coiling serpent ;
> He will slay the monster of the sea.

Gen 1 and Isa 27:1 present the OT view of the beginning and the end of linear history. They mark a major ideological difference between the OT and the nature cycles of Canaanite myth. On the other hand the serpent imagery is a continuity between the two which cannot be ignored. The same imagery is found in Rev 12:9 where

> The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent
> called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.
> He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

Certainly this passage is telling of an historical event which will take place in space and time but few would feel it must be fulfilled by means of a literal dragon.

In my article "The Mythological Elements in the Book of Job" I tried to show how a feel for the mythopoetic language actually enhances one's understanding of the true nature of God in the OT. Sheol, for example, where Mot (Death) is supreme

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[6] *Genesis: A Commentary* (OT Library; Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1961) 53. Attempts to read Tiamat into Gen 1:2 were strained and proven to be unwarranted by Alexander Heidel in *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940). If there is any allusion to mythology in Gen 1 it derives from the Hebrew polemic against pagan creation myths (cf. von Rad).

and Baal is powerless, is open before God so that its denizens tremble (26:6). In Ugaritic Mot has a never satisfied appetite. He says to Baal:

> I shall pound you, consume and eat you
> Lo, you are to go down
> into the throat of the god Mot,
> into the gullet of the Hero, beloved of El.[7]

How appropriate it is then for Isaiah to say of Yahweh "He will swallow up death in victory" (Isa 25:8; cf. 1 Cor 15:24).

Mot is also a hunter who uses snares, nooses and nets. We are not surprised to find Ps 18:4,5 (cf. Job 18:9-13) employing the same figure for death. But we may be surprised to find Job using the figure for God in 19:6.[8] This is only because Job's God holds the power of death in his own hands and is not helpless in the clutches of Death like Baal. If Job had believed the myths, his God would have been limited and he would have had no basis for his accusation in 9:24, "If it is not he, then who is it?" That is: Who is responsible for the apparent injustice in the world? This is a problem to Job only because his God is sovereign. The mythology allots to the gods their separate domains. With Baal dead Ashtar, the little Rebel god, is permitted by El to attempt

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[7] Mot as the Swallower gulps down even the mighty hero Baal; cf. *UT* 178 (text 67. 2. 2-5). The text may be translated:

> With one lip on the earth and the other in
>   the heavens
> his tongue (reaches) to the stars.
> When Baal enters his stomach he will go down
>   into his mouth like an olive ;
> like the produce of the land and the fruit
>   of the tree Baal the Victor will be swallowed.

[8] N. J. Tromp in *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the OJld Testament* (BibOr 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) 172f. has shown how all the deities used hunting nets and snares. Tammuz is "the Lord of the snares." The Psalmist uses the motif to describe his enemies but in every case it is symbolic of their attempts to kill him, not merely cause him to stumble. Psalm 124 presents an impressive array of figures based on the behavior of the gods. Although the Psalmist is talking about his human enemies, they cannot literally "swallow him alive" or "sweep him away with raging waters" or "tear him with their teeth." The New Testament understandably transfers this type of behavior to the Devil (2 Tim 2:26, 1 Pet 5:8).

to sit on Baal's throne, but not having the stature he does not succeed and must be content to be less than a cosmic deity.[9] But even El, the head of the pantheon, is sometimes portrayed as a weak and frightened character who cannot control the deities he sires.[10]

Similar to this conscious demythologizing is what we called anti-myth, which appears to be present in Ps 121 (cf. Jer 3:23). The Psalm is a polemic against both the cosmic mountain motif as expressed in hill-shrines and the deities themselves as patrons.

> I lift up my eyes to the hills--
>   where does my help come from?
> My help comes from the Lord,
>   the maker of heaven and earth.
>   (Ps 121:1, 2)

The stress on Yahweh as Creator is necessary, for the deities were identified with the natural forces of heaven and earth.[11] In a world full of patron deities the Psalmist shows that Yahweh is the only and true patron deity.

> He will not let your foot slip--
>   he who watches over you will not slumber
> Indeed, he who watches over Israel
>   will neither slumber nor sleep . . .
> The LORD will keep you from all harm. (Ps 121:3, 4, 7)

It may seem strange to us that the Bible should even imply

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[9] See H. L. Ginsberg's translation in ANET 140:
> Straightway Ashtar the Tyrant;
>   Goes up to the Fastness of Zaphon
>   (and) sits on Baal Puissant's throne.
> (But) his feet reach not down to the footstool,
>   Nor his head reaches up to the top.
> So Ashtar the Tyrant declares:
>   "I'll not reign in Zaphon's Fastness!"
> Down goes Ashtar the Tyrant,
>   Down from the throne of Baal Puissant,
>   And reigns in El's Earth, all of it.

[10] Ibid., 139. Upon hearing of Baal's demise El is helpless and goes into mourning pouring dust on his head and gashing himself with a stone.

[11] We noted ("Mythological Elements," 218) that El (Eloah) to Job was the Lord of all nature and the cosmos. In chapter 9 he speaks and the sun doesn't rise-the eclipse. He seals up the stars from sight; he stretched out the heavens all by himself.

that God might sleep but in terms of the god-language of the OT world where even patron gods might fall asleep or die such a concept was full of assurance and comfort to the faithful.

Comparative religionists have attempted to tie the patron deity language of Ps 91 to the magical incantations from 7th-century Arslan Tash.[12] But there is a significant difference between the two. In Ps 91 God protects those who love him and acknowledge his name (verse 14) and he sends his angels to guard them (verse 11). The Arslan Tash material involves no response, no relationship with the deity except perhaps to wear the amulet. It is true that the pestilence is personified (in verse 6 it stalks). In Ps 91 spiritual forces may be behind the pestilence and plague as was the Satan in Job.[13] That Satan should quote Ps 91:11,12 at Jesus' temptation shows how he considered the Psalm a special threat.

Psalm 82 has been used as a prime example of something less than pure monotheism in the OT. Such a view is theologically damaging because of the way Jesus used Psalm 82 in John 10 as an example of the truthfulness of Scripture. Jesus used it against the Pharisees who had accused him of blasphemy because it was considered very difficult in rabbinic circles. Jesus, by logic which moved from the lesser to the greater, proves he is not blasphem-ing, even from their limited point of view--that is, if those whom God is rebuking are called "gods" why should he not be called "'the Son of God," he who has devoted his life to serving and obeying his Father who sent him into the world.

Ps 82:1 is a classic example of the way the OT can use the word *'elohim* as a singular for God and then as a plural for "the gods." The NIV has wisely used quotation marks with the word "gods" to show humans (judges) not deities are in view. But as you examine the Psalm this is not so easy to determine. Curi-ously the Psalm seems to move in both directions.

The *'adat 'el* is an idiom used in Ugaritic (*'dt ilm*) for "the divine assembly"[14] ("the great assembly," 82:1, NIV) . The idea that heavenly beings assemble before Yahweh is not foreign to

[12] See *BASOR* 197 (Feb 1970) and 209 (Feb 1973).

[13] In Ps 104:3, 4 Yahweh who uses the clouds as his chariot has his angels in control of the winds and flames of fire.

[14] For *'dt ilm* see *UT* 453 (glossary no. 1816).

the OT, as we know from Job 1, 2 and Ps 89:5. Furthermore
Psalm 82 says in verse 7:

> Therefore you shall die like men
>   you shall fall like one of the princes.

If then they are going to die like mortals, they are not mortals.[15]

This language has led a number (most recently Cyrus Gordon)
to see the Psalm as a polemic against the pagan gods--even as
a prediction of the demise of polytheism because it was corrupt
especially in terms of social justice.[16]

The OT reveals no theological inhibition about imputing per-
sonality to false gods. Isa 41:21-24 labels the idols as no-gods
but finds no difficulty in referring to them personally. The term
"the God of gods" (Dent 10:17, Ps 136:2) is just a Hebrew
superlative. Ps 95:3 and 96:4, 5 describe Yahweh as a great king
above all gods. The latter implies these gods were beings in some
sense. And Jesus in John 10 implies that the "gods" of the
psalmist had some kind of created reality. Ps 82:6 is crucial for
the interpretation of the Psalm. According to the NT it is not
the psalmist who says: "I had thought, You are gods . . ."[17] but
God who says: "I said, You are 'gods' . . . but you shall die
like men."

From internal evidence a good case can be made for viewing
the "gods" as human. Verses 1 and 8 form an inclusio. The
'elohim of verse 1 rule the nations of verse 8. Because all these
"gods" fail to exercise justice and show mercy, the very founda-
tions of society crumble so God must destroy them and take over
his rightful possession. God's triumph is on earth not in heaven.
All rulers in Ancient Near Eastern literature claim that they pro-
vide for the poor and deliver the weak whether they do so or not.
The use of *'elohim* for such rulers in the Old Testament is gen-

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[15] The verse contains a merism similar to what is found in Phoenician
funerary texts where "ordinary men and royalty" means all mortals. See
the 'Esmun'azar Inscription *KAI* 1.3, line 4.

[16] C. H. Gordon, "History of Religion in Psalm 82," in *Biblical and
Near Eastern Studies* (ed. G. A. Tuttle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978)
129-131. Gordon looks on verse 6 as a continuation of God's words. Here
God is demoting the deities to mere mortals, marking the demise of
polytheism. This view ignores John 10.

[17] See fit. Dahood (*Psalms II* [AB 17; New York: Doubleday, 19681
268) for this translation.

erally acknowledged. The three cases in Exod 21:6 and 22:8,28 could be rendered "God." The NIV renders 21:6 and 22:8 as "judges" and only 22:28 as "God." Ps 58:2 (Heb) is a problem. The NIV renders *'-l-m* as "rulers" reading *'elim* rejecting the Massoretic pointing *'elem* "congregation" (KJV).[18] In Ps 58:12 NIV follows KJV rendering *yes 'elohim sopetim* "there is a God who judges."[19] But it could be rendered "there are 'gods' who provide justice in the earth." Although the evidence is slim, there seems to be enough to conclude that *'elohim* is a word used of that hierarchy of intelligent beings, human and super-human, over whom Yahweh is Creator and Lord.

Psalm 82 then is a theodicy vindicating the righteousness of God and these "gods" are "heavenly beings" who like Satan in Job are commissioned by God to rule the earth. They are also like the *mal'akim* (angels) whom God orders to protect the righteous in Ps 91:11. But Psalm 91 does not deal with social justice as does Psalm 82. So the *'elohim* in Psalm 82 are those commissioned to watch over the nations, not over an individual as in Psalm 91. But instead of performing this duty they turn into "the powers of darkness" (82:5, "They walk about in darkness").

The king of Babylon and the king of Tyre in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 ought to be approached from this perspective. The king of Babylon says

> You said in your heart,
>   'I will ascend to heaven;
> I will raise my throne
>   above the stars of God;
> I will sit unthroned on the mount of assembly,
>   on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.
> I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
>   I will make myself like the Most High.'
> But you are brought down to the grave,
>   to the depths of the pit.

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[18] The KJV "0 congregation" for *'elem* cannot be supported by usage.

[19] Normally the grammar accompanying *'elohim* should be singular when it means "God," as in 82:1. But there are a few cases in the OT where this is not so. The so-called plural of majesty sometimes takes the plural adjective (cf. 2 Sam 17:26 and Josh 24:19). The Joshua verse is interesting because the singular pronoun is used despite the plural adjective.

And of the king of Tyre Ezekiel says:

> You were the model of perfection
>   full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
> You were in Eden the garden of God . . .
> You were anointed as a guardian cherub,
>   for so I ordained you.
> You were on the holy mount of God
> You were filled with violence,
>   and you sinned.
> So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God,
>   and I expelled you, 0 guardian cherub.

Was the king of Babylon ever in heaven or the king of Tyre in Eden or heaven? Both fall to Sheol the way the *'elohim* do in Psalm 82. Such "gods" rule on earth by proxy through kings whose wills they dominate. This view does not contradict John 10 as long as a distinction is made between the Creator and the created. Whether spirit beings or men, they are created and, as Jesus said, "the word of God came to them." Such evil spirit beings were identified in Hebrew thinking with pagan gods. The *sedim*. of Ps 106:37 and Deut 32:17 are demons to whom erring Israel sacrificed their sons and daughters.[20] The rulers are so controlled by them that they emulate the activity of their deities. In Ugaritic mythology Anat who wishes to confiscate the bow of Aqhat hires an assassin to kill Aqhat who won't sell it.[21] So Jezebel orders the hiring of men to bring about the assassination of Naboth who won't sell his field (I Kgs 21). This is typical of the social injustice rebuked. in Ps 82.[22]

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[20] In I Cor 10:20 Paul looked on the heathen gods as demons.

[21] *UT* 248 (2 Aqht 6.15ff.).

J. A. Emerton ("Some New Testament Notes," *JTS* 11 [1960] 329-336) interpreted John 10:34ff along these lines. Although I have attempted to posit both superhuman and human aspects to these *'elohim*, Emerton says: "Jesus, however, does not find an Old Testament text to prove directly that men can be called god. He goes back to fundamental principles and argues, more generally, that the word 'god' can, in certain circumstances, be applied to beings other than God himself, to whom he has committed authority. The angels can be called gods because of the divine word of commission to rule the nations. This word may be 'Ye are gods' in verse 6 of the psalm. In any case, the existence of such a word of commission seems to be implied by the Jewish belief that the authority of the angels was derived from divine decree (Deut. iv.19, xxxii.8f Ecclus. xvii.17 ; Jubilees xv.31 ; I Enoch xx.5). Jesus, however, whose

We have seen that the mythopoetic language of the Old Testa-
ment conforms remarkably well with the god-language from
pagan sources, but we have also seen that this does not mean
the Old Testament writers were committed to any low view of
Yahweh--whether as storm-god, war-god or whatever. H. W.
Wolff makes this plain in his chapter on "The Hermeneutics of
the Old Testament":

> Following the signposts of the OT itself, we must seek to
> understand it on the basis of the peculiar nature of Yahweh,
> the God of Israel. In his essence, Yahweh is not a figure of
> mythology in the sense that one could speak of him in the
> manner of the myths of the neighboring lands, which chatter
> so much of the "private life" of their gods and of their life
> together in the pantheon. Yahweh is the one beside whom no
> other is god, and before whom all others are shown to be no
> gods.[23]

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commission is more exalted than theirs, and who is the Word himself,
has a far better claim to the title" (p. 332).
    [23] *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (ed. C. Westerman; John
Knox Press, Atlanta, 1963) 168.