

Article

The Hebrew Bible as Mythic “Vocabulary”: Towards a New Comparative Mythology

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that the history of the study of myth in the Hebrew Bible has been, and continues to be, shaped in negative ways by an essentially Romantic Nationalist understanding of the relationship between a people and their traditions. I then argue that more appropriate ways of modeling the construction of the Bible’s myths, combined with new investigations into the historical development of biblical traditions themselves, reveals a surprising continuity between the myth-making activity of biblical authors and editors and that of all those who retell and adapt biblical traditions in extrabiblical materials. I conclude that the existence of large-scale continuities between the adaptation of biblical traditions in different periods allows for a new kind of comparative investigation. By studying the use of biblical traditions in biblical literature, extrabiblical literature, and art, on approximately equal terms, we can gain new insights about the construction of biblical myths themselves, while connecting the study of the Hebrew Bible far more closely to the study of other bodies of tradition, elsewhere and later on.

Keywords: Hebrew Bible; myth; myth theory; romantic nationalism; comparative mythology

One of the goals of this special edition of the journal *Religions* is, surely, to introduce scholars in other disciplines to the state of the art, where the study of myth in the Hebrew Bible is concerned¹. This is quite a valuable purpose in and of itself. Perhaps, there is a sense in which every field is somewhat stereotyped, in the eyes of practitioners of other disciplines, by an earlier generation’s most influential ideas, which are generally the ones that have had time to have an impact. Or perhaps biblical studies—which sometimes does move a bit slowly compared to other disciplines, and, of course, has a history of arguments based in theological, rather than analytical concerns—suffers more than most in outside perceptions. Either way, the chance to reintroduce ourselves, with respect to the study of myth, seems to me a very valuable one.

This article, however, is more engaged with another, if related goal of this edition: using reintroduction as a starting point for productive cross-disciplinary conversations. I will discuss the historical development of the study of myth in the Hebrew Bible, particularly with respect to the ways in which it has been shaped—negatively, and for far longer than many realize—by an understanding of the relationship between peoples and their myths that essentially reflects outdated, nineteenth century Romantic constructions of national identity, and of the history of traditions. This will, however, be only one of three discussions in this article which, collectively, are intended to lay the groundwork for a new kind of comparative mythological investigation—one which can bridge the gap between the study of the Hebrew Bible’s myths and of other traditions, even far away and later on, in a new way.

This new comparative mythology, so to speak, will involve putting the biblical use of what I call the elements of biblical myth on an equal footing with the extrabiblical use of these same elements by

¹ In this respect, this special edition follows 2014’s Society of Biblical Literature publication, *Myth and Scripture*, edited by Dexter E. Callender, Jr.

others from antiquity to the present. By elements, I mean the characters, events, encounters, and other “quotable” materials—riddles, utterances, proverbs—that have appeared so often in extrabiblical materials, for so long a time². Of course, scholars in other disciplines have long explored the use of biblical “elements” in extrabiblical materials with one eye on the original, biblical narrative in what we might call “one-way investigations”, where knowledge of the Hebrew Bible helps explain biblical references in other texts and media. What we have not seen, and what I will argue we should see, is “two-way” investigations: analyses where we allow the extrabiblical use of these tradition elements to teach us about their biblical use as well.

Precisely because we need no longer be beholden to Romantic Nationalist understandings of the essential relationship between a people and their traditions, we are much better positioned to envision biblical authors themselves choosing, adapting, and repurposing materials from a much wider and older set of traditions for their own purposes. This makes their compositional activity much more like the activity of extrabiblical adaptors than we could once have believed, which allows the study of either phenomenon to illuminate the other somewhat equally. In other words, the whole range of uses to which particular tradition elements have been put between biblical and extrabiblical materials sketches the sphere of the possible with respect to how these elements can be used, which, in turn, offers new insights into how they have been used, even in the Hebrew Bible itself.

Indeed, we are increasingly aware of the creative agency of the authors and editors who created the familiar visions of the past, which is what makes them similar to all those that came after. After all, even many of the Hebrew Bible’s own traditions were not originally biblical but were developed as parts of Israelite and Judahite tradition worlds, where the eventual existence of the Bible was not anticipated. And, not only was the act of making them biblical a process of selection and adaptation, there are even many discrete historical instances that might also be thought of as “making” Bibles. These would include, at minimum, the canonization of these traditions as sources of greater authority than other traditions in that region, which seems not to have happened much, if at all, before the end of the first millennium BCE—and long after most of the narratives involved had taken on familiar shape—and the creation of different canons: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and so on and so forth³.

In other words, where the Hebrew Bible is concerned, at every stage, even the first, the authors and editors involved were engaged in the creative interpretation of inherited traditions, which creates a continuum of interpretation that does not begin as part of the Bible’s reception history but in biblical and even pre-biblical phases of the construction of what would be biblical narratives⁴. Thus it is precisely the case that the recognition of the essentially similar processes between what the creators of the familiar myths of the Hebrew Bible were doing and the further adaptation of these same myths in Jewish, Christian, or Muslim legends, in art and architecture, and even in popular culture, not only helps us understand these adaptations but fleshes out our understanding of what biblical authors could and did do themselves.

In order to construct the framework for this new and aggressively interdisciplinary kind of investigation, it is my intention in this article to bring together three discussions that, I will argue,

² J.W. Rogerson also distinguishes, in his study in the aforementioned volume, “between the terms *myth*, *mythological elements*, and *myth*”, describing these elements as “the themes or motifs or personalities that are found in myth and that are taken over into literature or art or drama” (Rogerson 2014, p. 15).

³ See especially (Mroczek 2015, 2016)

⁴ There are deeper currents here. In one particularly insightful study, for example, Brennan Breed refers to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and others to problematize the whole notion of a “reception history”. As he notes, the foundational assumption of reception historians is that “once a finished text leaves the pen of its author, or . . . moves beyond its original context, it enters in the world of reception history” (Breed 2014, p. 3). This “constitutive divide between textual production and reception” has played an immense role in the study of biblical traditions and their supposed afterlives (Breed 2014, p. 3). However, because all authors and all audiences are perpetually engaged in acts of interpretation, there is a sense in which “there is”—or at least might be—“no border between original and reception, and thus . . . no reception” (Breed 2014, p. 10). The continuum I am envisioning between the activity of biblical authors with respect to their inherited traditions, and the activity of the heirs of biblical traditions themselves, echoes this logic, but through the lens of somewhat less complex historical and conceptual considerations.

ought to be brought together but have, instead, generally proceeded quite separately. The first indeed concerns the role Romantic Nationalist assumptions have played and continue to play in the study of the Hebrew Bible's myths. As we will see, for much of the twentieth century, scholars—including Frank Moore Cross—were less interested in myth for its own sake, than as a factor to be reckoned with vis-à-vis what really interested them: the effort to reconstruct the supposedly original traditions of the ancient Israelite people, according to a Romantic Nationalist paradigm. Indeed, the identification of myth was often deemed an impediment to these efforts, and therefore, to be resisted. Today, the study of myth in the Hebrew Bible is on a much more modern footing in many ways but is still too often influenced by outdated assumptions about the relationship between a people and their traditions. Abandoning these assumptions more completely is the first step to recognizing the similarity between the biblical use of Israelite and Judahite traditions and the extrabiblical use of biblical traditions in many contexts, which is the key to the kind of investigation I will champion.

I will, however, add to this discussion, first, a consideration of contemporary debates concerning the chronology and tradition history of the composition of the Hebrew Bible's visions of the past. These have rarely, if ever, played any role in a consideration of the Hebrew Bible's myths, but absolutely should. In this case, the basic facts are that scholars have long been aware that the Hebrew Bible's narrative accounts of Israel's past, its heroes, and its great deeds, were not produced, in familiar form, in Israel at all but instead, in its southern neighbor, Judah—and only in periods that are quite late relative to the eras of most interest to the Hebrew Bible's authors. Only recently, however, has scholarship begun to acknowledge the fact that this means these visions are relatively late and Judahite in some fundamental way, and to explore the ramifications of that acknowledgement.

This debate about the ramifications of the late and Judahite chronology of biblical construction is not only useful for the larger project of this essay because it forces us to recognize that these Judahite authors were indeed drawing from sometimes much earlier traditions that came from different places, as their heirs would be, but because it also renders literal what the prior discussion leaves theoretical. In other words, we should not think of the biblical visions of the Israelite past and Israelite identity as straightforward crystallizations of a holistic Israelite sense of these quantities, not only because, after the heyday of Romantic Nationalism, we can acknowledge that this is not what a people's traditions are, but also, because this is literally the case. Instead, the specifically biblical versions of the myths preserved therein involve late, Judahite renditions of that past and that identity, which emerged at a particular time, in a particular place, among even a particular group of Judahites, and for particular reasons. This new awareness too reveals, essentially, the similarity between what biblical authors did to give older Israelite and Judahite traditions their familiar, biblical form, and what has been done with those same traditions ever since in literature, art, popular culture, and beyond, among authors and artists who also had their own, culturally contingent reasons to adapt pre-existing materials that is reflected in how these were adapted. And here, too, this similarity between contexts in which intention shapes how a story is told is conducive to comparison.

Finally, I will suggest a practical way forward, in pursuing the comparative investigations I imagine, by addressing one last aspect of contemporary discussions of myth and the Hebrew Bible that has, in some senses, overstayed its welcome. Here, I refer to the enduring influence of so-called “structuralist” approaches to the study of myth. Structuralism, as pioneered by Claude Lévi-Strauss, was in many ways based on the same latent Romantic Nationalist paradigm of traditions critiqued above, if largely implicitly. In early structuralist studies, it was broadly supposed that mythic inheritance was essentially a process of the same circumscribed set of stories being told repeatedly, in various ways. Since many myths—and types of myths—do reappear over and over again, structuralist approaches are still valuable for the study of those myths specifically. However, we can now recognize the existence of a large quantity of mythic phenomena which structural approaches cannot illuminate, including traditions and other media where familiar mythic elements appear disassociated from their more typical settings, or in unusual combinations. These kinds of traditions require a more flexible metaphor than “structures” to describe and analyze them.

What I will argue for, then—as I have before—is the efficacy of thinking of the elements of familiar mythic corpora as a mythic “vocabulary” (Tobolowsky 2017, pp. 204–5; 2020b, p. 178). That is, bodies of tradition like the Hebrew Bible, or like Israelite and Judahite myth before it, make available to their heirs a circumscribed set of mythological elements—again, meaning characters events, settings, and other forms of “quotable” materials—which are indeed related to each other, and possess particular meanings, as individual words do. However, like the elements of a linguistic vocabulary, these mythic materials are also available to cultures in disassociated forms, as individual units. These elements too, are often used in familiar arrangements—familiar turns of phrase and habits of expression—but can be used in quite unexpected ones. Or, they might appear, in a sense, as loanwords in other vocabularies.

I will conclude this discussion by arguing that this metaphor of vocabulary is a particularly fruitful one for use in “two-way investigations” because it is so flexible. When we imagine biblical and extrabiblical authors drawing from the same vocabulary, even to render turns of phrase that are particular to their contexts, and even when each age has certain things that can and cannot be said, we can study both biblical and extrabiblical traditions collectively as examples of the deployment of this shared vocabulary. Generally, when we think less in terms of the Bible and its reception history, and more in terms of the continuous use of pre-biblical tradition elements from the biblical period to the present, we can put those who study different parts of this continuous history in conversation with each other in useful ways. These conversations will be capable of providing fresh insights not only into the use of biblical traditions in so many different contexts—which can be illuminated through an increased awareness of the constantly creative character of historical interactions between ancient traditions and their heirs—but into the composition of biblical traditions themselves.

1. Romantic Nationalism and Biblical Myth

In the moving stream of the 20th century study of myths in the Hebrew Bible, two landmarks jut out of the current in a particularly prominent way, standing more than seventy years apart from each other. The first is the Genesis commentary produced by Hermann Gunkel in 1901, which in certain respects, set the tone for the study of biblical traditions even today—generally, in unfortunate ways (Gunkel 1901a). The other is Frank Moore Cross’ *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, which first appeared in 1973 (Cross 1973). In some respects, these two studies are very different from each other, which is why they have generally been treated differently in subsequent scholarship. Gunkel would, in some sense, open up the discussion of mythic elements in biblical literature—“let no one shrink from the word”—in contradistinction to scholars who preferred the identification of myth to be limited to traditions they regarded as “pagan”, itself a term since problematized (Gunkel 1901b, p. 17). However, Gunkel felt there were very few myths in the Hebrew Bible.

When we talk about Gunkel, it makes sense, as well, to talk about the famous Brothers Grimm, whose work began almost a century earlier. It was the Grimms who pioneered the definition of myth that Gunkel would largely adopt, and for whom myth, or *mythus*, was only one of three categories of similarly ahistorical traditions, along with *Sage*, the legend, and “*Märchen*”, the folk-tale⁵. For the Grimms, myths, in comparison to the other two genres, were the oldest—surviving, in Gunkel’s phrase, only in “faded colors”—and they were, fundamentally, stories in which divine beings play a major role. For Jacob Grimm, “divinities form the core of all mythology”.⁶ Thus, for Gunkel, too, myths were “stories of the gods, in contradistinction to legends in which the actors are men” (Gunkel 1901b, p. 17). While, then, the Bible had “allusions to . . . myths”, in, for example, the prophetic books, it had very few mythic narratives because of its supposed monotheism (Gunkel 1901b, p. 18). In other words, since “for a story of the gods at least two gods are essential”, it was “the fundamental trait of the religion of

⁵ As Kirkpatrick notes, “The threefold division is reflected in the three major publications of their folk narrative collections: *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, *Deutsche Sagen*, and *Deutsche Mythologie*” (Kirkpatrick 1988, p. 76). See also (Oden 1987, p. 46; Gomme 1908).

⁶ Translated in (Kirkpatrick 1988, p. 77). For the quote about “faded colors”, see (Gunkel 1901b, p. 18).

Jahveh” to be “unfavorable to myths” (Gunkel 1901b, p. 18). The mythic allusions Gunkel mentions “preserved traces of a point of view older than that of the tradition of Genesis”, but even these were in short supply (Gunkel 1901b, pp. 18–19).

As for Cross, even the title of his most famous study, 1973’s *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* seems far more promising, and so does his reputation as a scholar of myth in contemporary biblical studies. And indeed, this book is especially built around drawing comparisons between biblical narratives and Near Eastern myth, especially the “Canaanite myth” of the title. These “Canaanite” traditions are, generally, those of the Bronze Age city-state of Ugarit, discovered in the late 1920s. He also draws direct lines between traditions he regards as Canaanite “myth” and specific biblical traditions, for example, between the god of the Hebrew Bible and the character and deeds of the Canaanite god “El” (Cross 1973, pp. 1–76). Elsewhere in the study, he compares the activity of YHWH—the typical scholarly name for god, in the Hebrew Bible—in certain biblical traditions and references to the myths that cast the Canaanite Baal as the “Divine Warrior” (Cross 1973, pp. 91–155). From the perspective of his comparative approach especially, it is hardly surprising that Cross has so often been given credit for putting the study of myth in the Hebrew Bible on something like a modern footing⁷.

The differences between the approaches of these two scholars have, however, tended to obscure all that they share, which is substantial, and in fact, more significant, in my opinion, than what divides them. For one thing, both actually define myth in largely the same way, despite the fact that by Cross’ time, far more sophisticated and encompassing definitions existed. In his less influential, but far more explicit collection *From Epic to Canon*, Cross, too, characterizes myth as stories about gods, or “divinities”, and about events happening in the realm of the “cosmic” (Cross 1998, pp. 22–23)⁸. Far more importantly, however, few seem to have realized that Cross was explicitly opposed to the utility of the category of myth for the study of biblical literature except through comparison, and for the same reasons as Gunkel. He was, furthermore, motivated by the same beliefs about the historical development of traditions that had given shape to Gunkel’s far earlier study.

This part of our discussion begins neither with Gunkel nor Cross himself but more than a century earlier than the work of either. Really, it begins with the philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder in the late 18th century, or perhaps even earlier in the work of Giambattista Vico. To avoid too much of a digression, however, it is sufficient to say that Herder was a central figure in the development of a Romantic conception of national identity, championing the idea, essentially, that every nation has an identity, or character, that is all its own (Fox 1987, pp. 565–66; Wilson 2006, p. 110; Lampart 2004, pp. 171, 178; Abrahams 1993, p. 9; Vayntrub 2019, p. 19). The Irish, by virtue of being Irish, had certain characteristics, the French had certain characteristics, the Germans had certain characteristics—warlike, or pious, or poetic—and so on.

These national characters could be adulterated by circumstances, but they could not be destroyed, and were on some level both inalienable and always capable of making a full recovery⁹. And allied to Herder’s vision of the historical character of nations was a vision of the historical development of people groups through a series of stages, and the development of that people’s traditions along with them. A people, he argued, advanced from an era of childlike innocence, through eras of increasing sophistication, but also alienation from their own natural spirit (Kamenetsky 1974, p. 381; Lampart

⁷ Cross is one of two scholars Oden credits with inaugurating the crucial shifts in biblical studies that allowed for the serious study of biblical myth. The other is Brevard S. Childs and his *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*. Oden does acknowledge that while both “left far behind the former insistence that myths play no role in the Hebrew Bible, neither appears quite willing to entertain the possibility that mythical thought and mythical literature are at the very heart of Israel’s religion” (Oden 1987, p. 51).

⁸ More specifically, in “West and East Semitic myths, the actors are exclusively the gods, the terrain cosmic” (Cross 1998, p. 22).

⁹ As translated in an article by Carlton Hayes, “the most natural state is one people with one national character. This it retains for thousands of years, and this is most naturally formed when it is the object of its native princes; for a people is as much a natural plant as a family, only with more branches” (Hayes 1927, p. 735).

2004, p. 176)¹⁰. So, in this model, did a people's traditions, which proceeded from simple and natural to sophisticated and artificial, with some exceptions.

Where the study of myth is concerned, it would be these last two points that would prove decisive. Influenced by Herder, throughout the 19th century, many of those who studied traditions anywhere in the "western world" believed firmly in two propositions. First, they believed that the national character of a people was clearest in that people's infancy, so to speak, before the corruptions of civilization distanced them from their own most "natural" selves¹¹. Second, in those early stages, they believed that a people's traditions were inevitably oral, judged the most natural and spontaneous of modes of composition. This was the so-called Great Divide paradigm of literary production, in which early, oral, and often short poetry eventually gave way to sophisticated compositions but only as a people grew more distant from their own most fundamental character (Vayntrub 2019, pp. 2–11, 19; Wilson 2006, p. 116; Castle 2001, p. 4). "Folk poets", which is to say early, poets, the ones who had composed in a natural, unsophisticated, spontaneous oral form, "were national poets—the agents through whom the true character of a nation made itself manifest" (Wilson 2006, p. 116). Later, that character could only be, in a sense, reverse engineered from more artificial literary traditions.

In line with these assumptions, both Gunkel and Cross explicitly embraced the position that Israel's true traditions, its most revealing traditions, its most essential traditions, and above all, its most foundational traditions were not to be found in biblical literature at all. Instead, they would be the traditions of an earlier, oral age. The work of both scholars was directed largely towards the effort to reconstruct these hypothetical early oral traditions out of what survived, and to use these reconstructions to produce histories of early Israel¹². In general, they had far less interest in biblical texts than in the early oral literature they imagined must have preceded them and given them shape. They firmly believed, without evidence—as Martin Noth would put it, in his own similarly directed study—that "the decisive steps on the way to the formation of the Pentateuch were taken during the preliterate stage, and the literary fixations only gave final form to material which in its essentials was already given" (Noth 1972, pp. 1–2)¹³. They wished to reconstruct this early, essential literature, which would, by definition, be an early Israelite literature, even as both acknowledged the late, Judahite debut of the familiar forms of the basic biblical narratives in literary form.

Where the study of myth in the Hebrew Bible is concerned, the fact of the matter is that the category of myth functioned for both Cross and Gunkel, about equally, as an impediment to their traditio-historical project, which, therefore, had to be denied¹⁴. In Gunkel's case, his enmity to the idea of myth in the Hebrew Bible stems from the place myth had in the Grimm's "generic approach".

¹⁰ Julius Wellhausen, the most important biblical scholar of the late nineteenth century, would describe biblical traditions themselves, because they were written down in late periods relative to the early history of Israel itself, as "no longer ... [rooted] in child-like impulse" (Wellhausen 1885, p. 425). And, he, too, believed that the "mythic character" of Israel's old traditions had been "much obliterated" by later editors (Wellhausen 1885, p. 314).

¹¹ This term "natural" is in quotes because the idea of the natural, or *Naturpoesie* played such a role in early German Romantic nationalism—the poetry that a people produces naturally when it is most itself (Lampart 2004, p. 183; Kamenetsky 1974, p. 383).

¹² Gunkel, more in keeping with the tenets of Romantic Nationalism, believed these original traditions would be short poetic compositions, while Cross was not convinced. Indeed, this would be one of the main benefits of Cross' comparison with the Ugaritic materials, which had not been available at the time of Gunkel's commentary. He decries the "absurdity" of the "methodological assumption" that early compositions are necessarily short, as many Romantic Nationalists believed, suggesting that one could simply "[count] the lines" of the various Ugaritic epics, or indeed, the *Iliad* itself, and discover that even early ages were capable of lengthy composition (Cross 1998, pp. 35–36).

¹³ Noth envisioned traditions—"which doubtless were circulated and transmitted orally at first"—which were only eventually written down, and still later brought together in large literary works and these, in turn, through the purely literary labors of so-called redactors, were finally compiled into the large corpus of the transmitted Pentateuch. Thus, in his opinion, "it is the task of a 'history of Pentateuchal traditions' to investigate this whole process from beginning to end ... this history will have as its major interest not so much the later stages of Pentateuchal development ... as rather the origins and first stages of growth" (Noth 1972, p. 1).

¹⁴ Ivan Strenski refers to the importance of "a study of myth theorists themselves", and of asking questions about "why a theorist would bother creating such a theory. Why did theorists think they were right to say what they said about myth?" (Strenski 2014, p. 283). Here, he refers to his own previous study, (Strenski 1987).

Myth, in this model, was not so revealing as “legend”, where reconstructing the early history of a people, as a people was concerned (Kirkpatrick 1988, pp. 17–18)¹⁵. But whatever Cross said about myth in general, and however much he explored the relationship of biblical traditions to earlier traditions that were mythic—however great a role the study of some myths played in his analysis, in other words—he was no less opposed to understanding biblical traditions themselves as mythic than Gunkel had been. Through the lens of his comparisons with Canaanite myth, Cross did acknowledge that, in both these and biblical traditions, there existed elements of the “divine-cosmic”, which he considered mythic, and the “historic-political”, which he did not. However, because this balance was, he believed, so different in each case—because there was more of the “historic-political” and less of the “divine-cosmic” in the Bible—he argued that, fundamentally, “the category ‘myth’ ill suits the Israelite narrative complex” (Cross 1998, p. 23).

What we have to recognize is that Cross’ denial of the applicability of myth to the Bible’s account of Israel’s history in this instance was not merely a passing observation, but foundational to his whole project. It was this denial—and another of the applicability of “historical narrative”—that allowed him to substitute his preferred category, “epic” (Cross 1998, p. 23). This, in turn, allowed him to draw on then-current—though, no longer current—scholarship in the field of Classics on the oral transmission of epic materials over time, exemplified in the work of Milman Parry, Albert Lord, Cedric Whitman, and others (Parry 1930, 1932; Lord 1960; Whitman 1963)¹⁶. Their apparently robust findings on the transhistorical stability of oral transmission allowed Cross to model his reconstruction of the history of biblical traditions on the emerging paradigm of the Homeric poems. These, he believed, had been “carried by a continuous stream of bards, *oidoi*, reaching back into Mycenaean times, Greece’s heroic age”, and he saw a similar pattern unfolding between Bronze Age Canaan and Iron Age Israel (Cross 1998, p. 23). Thus, his denial of myth, and his substitution of epic, are what allowed him to study biblical traditions, and especially Pentateuchal traditions, as much earlier compositions than they actually, physically were, quite nearly as a whole.

Already, there were skeptics weighing in decisively against the possibility of long-term continuities of anything like the breadth Cross imagined between early oral literature and later textual compositions. In fact, there long had been. Martin Nilsson, roughly contemporaneous with Parry, had long since argued that it was unlikely oral tradition would survive intact even two or three generations, and this conforms with the findings of more contemporary studies (Nilsson 1932, pp. 11–12)¹⁷. Nevertheless, the Lord–Parry approach to epic was, for Cross, the key to performing his version of the project that also occupied Gunkel: reconstructing the supposedly original traditions of early Israel and the realities of early Israel out of them.

Even more importantly, where the present discussion is concerned, Cross, just like Gunkel, was not interested in reconstructing pre-biblical traditions merely because they were older and might, therefore, be interesting. Instead, both whole-heartedly embraced Romantic Nationalist assumptions about the value of early, oral traditions over later literary ones, for the study of a people and their character—though, long after the theoretical foundations of those assumptions had been repudiated. Cross, like Gunkel, like Noth, like Von Rad, like so many others, understood the traditions that he supposedly recovered as a more holistic and foundational expression of Israelite identity than their surviving literary reflections could be. As he put it, “epic”, whether Israelite or otherwise, was to be understood as “the traditional narrative cycle of an age conceived as normative, the events of which

¹⁵ Because, generally, myths derived from an even earlier age, and from a kind of prehistory, while legends had “almost the authority of history” (Kirkpatrick 1988, p. 24).

¹⁶ “Moreover, I wish to define this term rather narrowly, drawing upon studies of Homeric epic for delineating the traits of epic and for analogies to aid in understanding the nature of Hebrew epic lore” (Cross 1998, p. 23).

¹⁷ As Mait Koiv has much more recently observed, it is “now usually assumed that a relatively detailed tradition—oral history—does not reach back more than a hundred years” and that traditions are constantly remodeled according to the needs of changing circumstances (Koiv 2003, p. 14).

give meaning and self-understanding to a people or nation" (Cross 1998, p. 27). Neither Gunkel nor Herder would have put the sentiment much differently, though they used different terms.

Thus, while Cross' *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* has typically been understood in terms of its exploration of the continuities between Canaanite traditions and biblical traditions, the title is also meant to express a contrast. The Canaanites had myth, but the biblical authors had epic, and not myth. And this was why, in Cross' opinion, the ancient, early traditions that were Israel's foundational traditions, and the expression of their national character, were accessible through them. If biblical traditions were mythic traditions rather than epic traditions, these authorizing comparisons with the work of Parry, Lord, and others, which would prove so influential in biblical studies, would have been closed to him.

2. Whose Bible?

Today, the study of myth in the Hebrew Bible is on an essentially modern footing. Again, despite the fact that Cross' interest in myth has proven so influential, his definitions of mythic traditions—as stories about divinities or cosmic realms—had already long been replaced by more expansive definition by the time it was published. These were, on the whole, less engaged with the Grimms', or with anyone else's largely futile efforts to border off myth from other kinds of similar material, in other fields. In 1987, for example, Robert Oden would apply a quite different definition to myth, in his influential study, *The Bible Without Theology*, which would actually be borrowed in its entirety from a book by Joseph Fontenrose: "traditional tales of the deeds of *daimones*: gods, spirits, and all sorts of supernatural or superhuman beings" (Oden 1987, p. 56; Fontenrose 1966, vol. 18, pp. 54–55)¹⁸. Fontenrose's book actually appeared seven years before *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, and his definition is far more consonant with contemporary approaches than that of Cross or Gunkel.

Freed from the narrow confines of the definitions of myth in the work of the Grimms, Gunkel, Cross, and many others, biblical scholars quickly began to realize just how much myth there was in the Bible. In the 2014 volume that proceeds this special edition as a kind of summary of contemporary myth theoretical approaches, a range of definitions appear, but a range that would be quite familiar to anyone who studies myth elsewhere. Some, for example, define or discuss myth in its capacity as a kind of narrative that is other than history (Kawashima 2014, pp. 51–52; Willis 2014, p. 150). Others, drawing especially on the work of Mircea Eliade, describe myth as a narrative defined by its setting in a time or place that is not quite real or not quite ours (Kawashima 2014, p. 52; Smith 2014, p. 82), while some consider mainly the immense difficulties the term poses (Rogerson 2014, p. 16; Strenski 2014).

In the same volume, Callender, Jr. and Green consider myth in its capacity as a category applied externally by scholars, and in the biblical case, in opposition to another category, "scripture" (Callender and Green 2014; Callender 2014). Others, outside of this collection, embrace a "structuralist" approach, or a modified structuralist approach, descending to some degree from the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Thus, for example, Debra Ballentine has offered a kind of structuralist definition, via the work of Bruce Lincoln, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Russell McCutcheon, of myth as "narrative taxonomy" (Ballentine 2015, p. 7)¹⁹. In other words, mythic narratives are taxonomic expressions of the relationship between mythic

¹⁸ Oden also surveys the definition of many scholars, including Mircea Eliade, Paul Ricoeur, Walter Burkert, and before embracing Fontenrose's, engaging directly with the history of the study of myth in other places as previous biblical scholarship did not. See also (Eliade 1963, pp. 5–6; Ricoeur 1969, p. 101; Burkert 1979, p. 23). Other definitions are worth noting as well. Robert Segal, over the course of several pages, describes myth as "a story"—or, a "belief or credo"—that is "about something significant", which "can take place in the past, as for Eliade and Bronislaw Malinowski, or in the present or future", whose protagonists are "personalities—divine, human, or even animal" with a "weighty" function (Segal 2004, pp. 4–6). The story must additionally "be held tenaciously by its adherents. But I leave open-ended whether the story must in fact be true" (Segal 2004, p. 6). In a similar survey, Karen Armstrong asserts that myths are "nearly always rooted in the experience of death and fear of extinction", "usually inseparable from ritual", "about extremity", "about the unknown", "not a story told for its own sake", and it "speaks of another plane that exists alongside our own world, and that in some sense supports it" (Armstrong 2005, pp. 3–4).

¹⁹ (Lincoln 1999, p. 147; Smith 1985, 1996).

figures and events that serve “as a template for people to create and express meaning” (Ballentine 2015, p. 3). Through the lens of any of these definitions, almost any tradition about Israel’s past that appears in the Hebrew Bible deserves the designation myth. There are some parts of the books of Kings—dry recountings of the lengths of a king’s reign by the numbers alone—that might evade this identification, but then again, even these might be part of some essentially mythicizing project.

Still, despite the ongoing modernization of definitions of myth in biblical studies, biblical scholars—as in fact, scholars in many fields—have had a considerably more difficult time moving beyond the idea that a set of mythic traditions inherently belongs to the culture that produced them, and not just then but for all time. It may well be, as Wendy Doniger argues, that “a myth is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it”, or, as Russell McCutcheon does, that myths are instead more active devices through which “a group of people fabricate their most important meanings” (Doniger 2011, p. 3; McCutcheon 2000, p. 200). Certainly, popular myths can play an important historical role and, as they are retold, reflect *or* fabricate important cultural values. Certainly, important traditions are very often pressed into important service.

There is, however, a problem of collective action here. The idea that it is a people, as a whole, who has or tells a story, or inherits and reshapes a story, is flawed on many levels. For one thing, research has shown that “social” or “collective” memory does not really exist in the way so often presumed by scholars of myth (Wilson 2016, p. 24; Olick and Robbins 1998, p. 112; Wertsch 2009, pp. 118–24; Erll 2010, p. 5). Instead, as Astrid Erll puts it, “much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs” (Erll 2010, p. 5). Similarly, the idea of the cultural group itself has also been problematized, especially in the work of Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker 2004, 2006; Brubaker and Cooper 2005).

In one particularly relevant passage, Brubaker refers to Richard Handler’s observation that “scholars writing about nationalism tend to slip unwittingly into an analytical language that embodies characteristically nationalist assumptions about the boundedness, homogeneity, and historical continuity of ‘the nation’” (Brubaker 2006, p. 10; Handler 1988, p. 8). In other words, when we talk about a “people’s traditions”, we are unconsciously reinscribing the objective existence of a historically bounded entity that does not really exist. When we are describing a “people” finding, or fabricating, important meanings through stories, we have the same problem.

Then, when we imagine a “people” passing their traditions through the generations, we are imagining a model of memory that does not fit reality, even though the way that traditions really are inherited can give the impression of a continuous, collective process. As Marc Bloch put it, eighty years ago,

“A society that could be completely molded by its immediately preceding period would have to have a structure so malleable as to be virtually invertebrate. It would also have to be a society in which communication between generations was conducted, so to speak, in ‘Indian file’—the children having contact with their ancestors only through the mediation of their parents. Now this is not true. It is not true even when communication is purely oral.” (Bloch 1964, p. 40)

Instead, the passage of traditions through history is far more complex, far less linear, and far less shaped by Romantic notions of who a tradition belongs to, in some essentialist sense, than many still suppose.

Here, however, we see one of the reasons that better connecting the study of the Hebrew Bible’s traditions to the study of other traditions can be useful in both directions. The simple facts of the case, where the composition of biblical traditions is concerned, reveal the fallacy of thinking mainly in terms of the relationship between one people and their traditions, over time, as a general rule. For one thing, as I mentioned above, since the days of Julius Wellhausen in the late 19th century, biblical scholars have widely acknowledged that the biblical accounts of the history of ancient Israel not only emerged

in a rather late period, but not in Israel at all—instead, in Judah. Here, a brief digression on the subject of the Bible and history is warranted.

The biblical visions of the history of Israel, whether in the lengthy narrative spanning Genesis through Kings, or the shorter account in the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, can be broken down into a series of stages. After the patriarchal age of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob comes the era of the exodus. After the exodus comes the Joshua-led “conquest”, and after the conquest, the rather inchoate era of the “Judges”, when Israel was supposedly ruled by local strongmen and women. Four hundred years later, supposedly, the Israelite monarchy is founded by Saul, followed by David and Solomon, but upon the death of Solomon, the Israelite kingdom splits into parts—the bigger kingdom, still called Israel, and the smaller kingdom, now called Judah. After roughly two centuries, Israel is conquered by the Assyrians, an event which occurred historically in 722 BCE. Judah survived until its conquest by the Babylonians, in what we know to be 586 BCE²⁰. Then, after Judah’s conquest, many of the Judahite elite were taken away into Babylonian exile, the period scholars call “the Exile”, and after the conquest of Babylon by Persia (in 539 BCE), these Judahites were gradually allowed to return.

Over the last hundred and twenty years, scholars have acknowledged that less and less of this story is likely to have a historical basis, even in a kind of “kernel of truth” sort of way. Today, most believe that the history of Israel starts in Canaan, after the biblical-but-not-historical events of the patriarchal and exodic age would long since have taken place, if they were real events. In fact, we do not even know whether the United Monarchy of David and Solomon, and perhaps Saul, really existed, because the evidence is so fragmentary. All we can say for sure is that, by some time in the early ninth century BCE, there were two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, that may or may not have existed earlier, and may or may not have been previously unified (Fleming 2012, p. xii). Later, we know that the conquests of Israel and Judah happened, and that there was both an exile and a return. At the same time, the exile seems to have included a far smaller percentage of the Judahite population than the Bible suggests and the “Return” seems to have occurred much more gradually and over a longer period of time than the Bible suggests (Becking 2006; Barstad 1996). Still, the Persian conquest did inaugurate the “Persian period” in the region, which lasted until Alexander’s conquest of Persia in 332 BCE.

It was Wellhausen, and really, an even earlier scholar named Karl Heinrich Graf, who established, more or less until now, that there probably was nothing even like the literary Pentateuch—the so-called “Five Books of Moses”—prior to this Persian period, for various reasons too complex to elaborate here (Wellhausen 1885, pp. 2–11). It is also perfectly clear that the final, literary forms of the biblical narratives emerged in Judah, not Israel. In 2 Kings 17, for example, biblical authors claim erroneously that the entirety of the population of the kingdom of Israel had been taken into Assyrian exile and replaced by foreigners—something only a Judahite, wishing to strengthen their claim to Israelite identity would do²¹. The methodologies of Gunkel, Cross, and many others were aimed at getting around this set of facts, to reconstruct Israel’s supposedly original traditions. They were not aimed at denying their accuracy.

Today, since we are no longer able to assume so much about the historical continuity of either traditions or identity over time, it is hardly surprising that a number of new studies have emphasized the ways in which the biblical project, though built around Israelite and Judahite traditions alike, is fundamentally a Judahite version of Israelite history and identity²². As Fleming recently put it,

²⁰ This circuitous phrasing is to underscore the point that the Bible does not include absolute dates.

²¹ See especially (Knoppers 2013). This position has been complicated in recent years by a resurgence of interest in the people of the northern kingdom, after the Assyrian conquest, who were the ancestors of the “Samaritans”. Since we now recognize that these were Israelites, and not the foreigners brought in by the Assyrians that 2 Kings 17 depicts, the northerners may well have had more involvement in the production of biblical stories, in later periods, than we used to think. Still, the presence of texts like 2 Kings 17 already reveals the ultimate importance of Judahite interests in finishing the narratives.

²² This brand of approach, in many ways, has its roots in the work of Philip Davies, though contemporary discussions are often executed in quite a different vein (Davies 1992, 2007).

“Insofar as people from Judah laid claim to the name Israel, I consider this a Judah perspective . . . the inheritance of Israelite material takes place after the realm was definitely called Judah, and may be considered literally Judahite . . . When the people called Israel and Judah are treated as a single entity, differentiated only by minor matters of degree . . . the particularly Judahite matrix for all biblical writing may be missed.” (Fleming 2012, p. 4)

There is room, more or less, for differing imaginations of how conservative or flexible these Judahite authors and editors in the Persian period were with respect to the traditions they inherited. There is not room, however, for continued, overly credulous denials of the importance of Israel and Judah’s long separate histories, the wars between them, and separate sets of the kind of experiences that we know to shape and reshape identity in the formation of the biblical vision of Israel (Crouch 2014, p. 97).

These new understandings, not so much of the history of biblical composition but of its significance, not only problematize the relationship between biblical authors and their source materials, they also, in a sense, rewire it. In other words, it now seems much more important that the Hebrew Bible’s visions of the past are fundamentally late productions than it used to seem. Today, a number of scholars now argue that this Judahite representation of an Israelite past and of Israelite traditions represents an act of cultural appropriation: that, in fact, the Judahites did not think of themselves as Israelites until sometime after the Assyrian conquest of Israel, when they borrowed for themselves an Israelite identity (Davies 1992; Kratz 2006; Na’aman 2014; Finkelstein 2013, 2011; Fleming 2012; Monroe and Fleming 2019). Either way, the fact that the creation of these narratives and visions of Israel happened in a region that had been politically separate from Israel for centuries at the very least, with a lengthy, eventful, independent history of its own, forces us to think of the activity of sixth, fifth, and maybe even fourth century BCE Judahite authors differently.

Basically, we must not think in terms of where the traditions that, at last, appeared in biblical form between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, stand in the Romantic model of a grand chain of transmission for Israel’s most sacred traditions, from the earliest Israelite days to the latest Judahite ones. Instead, we should think in terms of individuals, or small groups, selecting from, adapting, and arranging some of a much larger body of Judahite and Israelite materials in order to communicate their own sense of self and of what is important (Choi 2010, pp. 1–7)²³. In my own work, I have compared the collection, arrangement, and display of pre-existing traditions and texts to a museum exhibit (Tobolowsky 2020a). No answer to the question of where the majority of artifacts come from originally, and no detail about their survival, keeps us from having to address why they were selected, arranged, and exhibited, by whom, and how the intentions of those curators gave shape to the vision they produced. We cannot let the question “are these artifacts ancient” keep us from realizing they were chosen for display, in arrangement with other artifacts, and they did not have to be.

More than that, we must see biblical authors as something other than vessels through which the early traditions of Israel passed on their continuous voyage into the present. We must picture them selecting from among the artifacts that were available to them, and, to an extent, choosing what to use and how. Some of these artifacts would have been very old and would have demanded inclusion by virtue of their cultural prestige, and some likely came as part of already articulated exhibits that had, so to speak, toured elsewhere (Tobolowsky 2020a, p. 241). The value of the museum exhibit metaphor, however, is that it reveals how much agency those who construct new exhibitions have, even when most of the materials involved were received, intact, from earlier ages, and even earlier exhibits.

In a sense, then, what I am suggesting is only this: there is not that much even of conceptual difference between how sixth through fourth century Judahite authors constructed an exhibit out of

²³ As Breed observes, “one might assume that transmission always relied on a combination of copying and authorial-editorial work, and that there were, from a time preceding any community’s assent to authority—if such assent has been anything other than a gradual process—multiple textual traditions that continued along interwoven trajectories” (Breed 2014, p. 22).

received cultural artifacts, and how later authors, and artists, made new exhibits from many of the same artifacts. This is broadly true in any instance in which elements of ancient myth are repurposed in some way. Those who retell ancient stories today have similar choices to make about what to tell, and how to tell it, out of a larger and older body of traditions, as those who told them in the first place. The *way* that they make them can sketch for us, very generally, what kind of choices can be made. Scrutiny of the choices that produce new stories from inherited traditions can always aid in the two-way investigations I am describing. Yet, all of this is especially true of the Hebrew Bible for a variety of reasons.

Above all, the simple fact of the matter is that many people around the world continue to grow up with the understanding that biblical traditions are their myths, whether they would use this term or another, like scripture. Where many other ancient mythologies survive because they are interesting and evocative, with a special currency in the regions where they first developed—Greek mythology, for example—the myths of the Hebrew Bible include many of the most important sacred traditions of billions of people around the world. To say that ancient Judahites and contemporary Americans, for example, understand the traditions now in the Bible to be theirs in roughly the same way is not to say that they in fact relate to those traditions in an identical fashion. There are not only modern and ancient ways of reading and relating to texts that are not commensurate with each other, there are a variety of readings that make sense for a variety of contexts. The fact that the Hebrew Bible itself was produced as a work of Iron Age Levantine literature matters, too, and many of its mysteries are only penetrable when we explore them through the lens of that historical context.

Nevertheless, it is the case that someone living in Judah in the sixth century BCE and in America in the twenty-first century CE would very likely both think of the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Samson and Delilah, David and Bathsheba as their traditions in some fundamental way, because of the ongoing centrality of the Bible's traditions within so many different cultures. So, from the perspective of both sets of adapters, it is very often their own sacred traditions that they are redeploying in ways that make sense to them. This reality is what produces the conceptual similarity between a Judahite author's adaptation of an earlier tradition and, say, a monk's illumination of a manuscript, a religious painter or sculptor's vision of Moses, or a rabbi or priest's use of biblical traditions in a sermon. There would have been different rules about how these traditions could be used in different contexts. And yet, in each generation, the individuals involved in adapting these ancient traditions would have been adapting traditions they grew up with, that were central to their culture, and that had some sense of the sacred about them.

Ultimately, as they stand among the main cultural traditions of many different cultures, biblical traditions are available for analysis through a form of cross-cultural comparison that is usually unavailable, and certainly unfamiliar. If a priest or rabbi who reaches back to the story of Samson for some apposite legend is not doing anything very different from a Judahite author choosing to include that story in the book of Judges, then both can teach us about the experience and subjectivity of the other, revealing otherwise hidden realities concerning the use and adaptation of traditions: a two-way reflection, as I put it above. Generally, when we do not use Romantic Nationalist constructions of the nation to separate the biblical use of these traditions from their later use, we can indeed interrogate each as a species of use quite like the other. By expanding our knowledge of the realm of the possible, and applying it to both contexts under consideration, we can profit by the exchange.

3. Stories or Elements

In the study of mythic traditions, there is already a considerable history of thinking about myths less as narratives and more in terms of narrative elements that get used and reused, in different arrangements, over and over again. Approaches of this sort have their origin, for the most part, in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and his so-called "structuralist" approach to the study of myths. Certainly, whether it should still have all of its currency today or not, Lévi-Strauss' 1955 article *The Structural Study of Myth* is one of the true monuments of the genre of myth theory. In it, he describes myths as a

form of language, and a form “like the rest of language . . . made up of constituent units” (Lévi-Strauss 1955, p. 431). Lévi-Strauss advocated for the study of mythic traditions through an analysis of the changing relationship between these constituent units in new versions of familiar myths²⁴.

Structuralist approaches, of one sort or another, have continued to flourish into the present, and for the most part, with good reason. There are stories that get told over and over again, where meaning is made through adaptation and rearrangement. Certainly, this is true of traditional stories, but also of the inheritance of myth quite generally. The story of Chanukah, or Purim, might get told every year, with local variations, but James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad*, and *O Brother Where Art Thou* all draw their strength from a global familiarity with Homer’s *Odyssey*, which they then tweak. For that matter, the movie *Shrek* derives much of its charm from the fact that there is a Prince Charming, an ogre, and a princess as expected, but that they interact with each other in unexpected ways.

Thus, Doniger describes familiar mythic narratives as a “skeleton”, noting that “even the same skeleton can support very different bodies. Abraham Lincoln and Marilyn Monroe had, basically, the same skeleton (give or take a rib or two)” (Doniger 2011, p. 100). She has pioneered the concept of the “micromyth”—the simplest possible, least inflected arrangement of the familiar elements of a given tradition. She describes it as “not merely a scaffolding on which each culture erects its own myths; it is more like a trampoline that allows each culture to fly far away to its own specific cultural meanings, leaping to make wildly different variants” (Doniger 2011, p. 99). Both the idea of a “skeleton” and a “scaffolding” are, of course, inherently structural metaphors.

Debra Ballentine, a biblical scholar, has described myth—à la the works of Bruce Lincoln and J.Z. Smith—as “narrative taxonomy”, as I noted above. She then employs this metaphor in her discussion of the “Conflict Myth”, an ancient Near Eastern pattern in which a hero, often divine, takes on a monster, elemental force, or both at once, and triumphing, establishes their authority (Ballentine 2015, p. 7). A taxonomy, of course, is an arrangement of elements which express a hierarchy between in them. In Ballentine’s purview, “myths elaborate sets of relationships among characters . . . The significance and connotations of these relationships change as mythic stories are repeatedly retold and reshaped” (Ballentine 2015, p. 3). Thus, new versions of the “same” story reveal new variations on familiar taxonomic relationships.

Personally, I have long preferred a more flexible metaphor, regarding mythic elements as a kind of “vocabulary” (Tobolowsky 2017, pp. 204–5; 2020b, p. 178). This is not because I fail to see the value of more strictly structuralist approaches. However, I think they should now be viewed as more limited than they would have seemed in older understandings of the inheritance of mythic traditions. The same stories do get told and retold, and we need a way to talk about them and analyze them. I would argue, however, that Lévi-Strauss’ original approach was shaped by the same Romantic Nationalist presuppositions described above, in which it seemed as if a limited repertoire of original traditions were always in the process of being inherited and adapted, but rarely added to in supposedly less original ages. Only in this paradigm will a vision of storytelling as, in a sense, largely a form of tweaking what already exists seem to apply to the majority of mythic narratives.

Today, we recognize that the elements of familiar mythic traditions appear not only as part of those traditions retold, but individually, in small groups, as bit characters in other narratives, or in narrative allusions, and so on. There are, as I noted above, many narratives that are explicitly retellings of Homer’s *Odyssey*, and many more that express the same narrative pattern: the *Homeward Bound* movies, for example. But, Odysseus himself also shows up, briefly, in Dante’s *Inferno*, and the “Odyssey” is also the name of a type of Honda. In these cases, it helps to know the traditions that are being referenced, but the traditions themselves do not appear—and so, there are no new arrangements of narrative elements to consider.

²⁴ As Christopher Johnson glosses this inaugurating argument, “myth is made up of elements or constituent units . . . the meaning of myth is not to be found in its isolated constituent elements, but in the way in which these elements are combined” (Johnson 2002, p. 236).

I would say, then, that structuralist approaches are still quite useful when applied to traditions that involve the reorganization of familiar elements and the hierarchies between them. There are, however, plenty of places where myths or mythic elements appear where structuralist approaches are not useful. There are, in other words, a wide variety of other contexts in which the elements of familiar traditions appear outside of familiar narrative structures, or of any structures, and these need to be studied as well. Otherwise, we leave a great deal that might plausibly be called “myth” alone, and certainly, have little to say about the use of mythic elements outside the confines of mythic narratives.

Thus, a “vocabulary”.²⁵ The term implies a circumscribed set of semantic units, though not necessarily a small one, that are related to each other because they are part of the same language. It also acknowledges the reality: mythic elements, like vocabulary elements, are most often used in familiar turns of phrase—so to speak. However, the concept also flexibly accommodates the existence of the quite unexpected, as arrangements go, as well. A vocabulary allows not only for dog bites man, or the newsworthy man bites dog, but for the man and the dog to do much as they please, quite apart from each other. “Vocabulary” also allows us to acknowledge that the individual elements of familiar myths are granted meanings and associations by the role they play in fully articulated contexts, but that they retain meaning outside of these contexts—meanings of their own—which offer quite a semantic range to those who want to employ them.

We might think of it this way. A taxonomy explains the relationship between *Shrek* and familiar fairy tales, but not other stories about ogres—even ones that draw on the same basic traditions about what ogres look like and do. A particular skeletal structure might provide both Abraham and Marilyn Monroe with approximately equal support—but not a hippopotamus, not a chimera, and not a Piltdown man, composed of the parts of different skeletons. Yet, chimeras and Piltdown men are very often what we have. Scaffolding can be used to build a farmer’s hut or the Taj Mahal—but it can also be taken apart and used as building materials itself. The concept of a “vocabulary” is simply more adept at describing all of the things myths and mythic elements are used to do and can be, than structural metaphors are.

The Hebrew Bible, one of the most popular, most enduring, best-known collections of mythic traditions in the history of the world—if not the most—contains a potent mythic vocabulary that has been in use continuously for over two thousand years outside of it. It is a vocabulary that has been used by so many different people, in so many different cultures, as a first language, in vocabulary terms, in continuous deployment, in so many different ways—in new myths and legends, in visual art, in pop culture. That is, it is not only the ancient Israelites, or Judahites, who can be idiomatic speakers of this language, but all of those who regard the Hebrew Bible as part of their own cultural watershed. And this fact is what positions us to ask questions not just in one direction, as it were, but in both. We can ask not only how the biblical image of Solomon shapes his portrayal in a stained glass window, or a 17th century sermon, or as the legendary progenitor of the royal house that ruled Ethiopia into the 1970s, but also what the stained glass, or priestly or rabbinic, or Ethiopian use of Solomon tell us about how biblical authors might have used the pre-existing traditions they also chose from. We can ask what does how the stained glass artist *use* Solomon tell us about how the figure of Solomon can be used that we can then apply to the study of the biblical text itself? What does the change in understandings of Solomon in different contexts into the present tell us about how the understanding of Solomon might have changed over long, eventful, Judahite centuries as well, between the period in which legends about the king first appeared and that in which the biblical account was finalized? And so on.

²⁵ This term is not unfamiliar among scholars of myth. Lévi-Strauss, again, thought of mythic elements as the “constituent units” of a kind of language, while Doniger explicitly refers to the “elements . . . held in common by all versions” of a story as “like items of vocabulary in a language”, and elsewhere, as “nouns” and “verbs” (Lévi-Strauss 1955, p. 431; Doniger 2011, pp. 99, 102, 106). Yet, in both of these cases, the whole story remains the basic unit of analysis. For Lévi-Strauss, “the true constituent units of myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations*” (Lévi-Strauss 1955, p. 431). For Doniger, the constituent unit is the “micromyth” as the “neutral structure . . . the nonexistent story with no point of view” that exists as a particular arrangement of nouns and verbs (Doniger 2011, pp. 99, 102).

In the process of asking these two-way questions, we can open up a whole new frontier for the study of biblical traditions and a new set of reasons for scholars in other disciplines to consider biblical scholarship in the study of later and wider worlds—and vice versa. A model of the history of biblical myths, in which their development and reception are not treated as different stages of that history, but equally part of the continuous use of a broadly shared “mythic vocabulary”, allows for the direct comparison between instances of that use on equal terms, in a kind of investigation that has rarely, if ever, been tried. Again, there are an increasing number of studies that problematize the existence of a firm divide between the Bible’s development history and its reception history in various ways, including studies authored by Breed, Choi, and Mroczek, all cited above, as well as the work of Seth L. Sanders. It is Sanders who notes, for example, that new approaches to the study of the Bible’s sources are less engaged in the reconstruction of the original text and more on the development of “continuous flows of discourse, persisting over time” (Sanders 2011, p. 167). What there has not been, and should be, are efforts to employ the burgeoning recognition of the ongoing fluidity of the Hebrew Bible’s traditions in the service of the ambitious comparisons I have described throughout: not just between the Bible and the early Jewish and early Christian world, but between the biblical world and any context in which the elements of biblical myth are given new life. We can, in short, think of biblical authors choosing from a much larger mythic vocabulary to tell their stories, and extrabiblical authors choosing from among biblical traditions as doing much the same thing, and allow the study of either to teach us about the other—by illuminating what has been done and what can be done.

Exploiting the possibilities here will require a serious commitment to cross-disciplinary approaches, and very likely, collaboration. There are, however, a great many possible benefits to be had by understanding the biblical use of Israelite and Judahite traditions as essentially similar to the later use of the same traditions. The Judahites constructed a vision of Israel that emerged at, at least, a mild remove from ancient Israel, both geographically and chronologically, and in a way that made sense to them in that time and place. Others have been doing the same ever since. We can study the constant deployment of biblical vocabulary as a continuous history, in order to paint a truer picture of what this vocabulary can be made to say, and what certain phrases must mean, from the very beginning.

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