

Divine Revelation and Myth

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*“Swarming in the atmosphere of our spiritual lives are innumerable deadly germs ever ready to fasten upon the depleted and weakened soul, and, propagating its leprous contagion through every faculty, destroy the spiritual life.” — Father Felix Sarda y Salvany, **What is Liberalism?***

During the holy seasons of Easter and Christmas, Catholics are told that the pertinent events discussed in Sacred Scripture consist of “myth,” “mythological elements,” or “mythic roots.” Never mind that many scholarly sources concede that it is difficult to define myth (cf. G. Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* IV, 762-795). Further, critics say this “mythic” Scripture is not limited to the empty tomb and Incarnation but to all of Holy Writ. This alleged relationship between Scripture and “myth” requires an analysis via the Holy Bible, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.

The Bible and Myth: The Scriptural Testimony

Per the critics, one ought to expect numerous appearances of the term “myth” in the Old Testament. On the contrary, the term is restricted to two passages: Sirach 20:19 and Baruch 3:23. Moreover, the term is not found in the accessible Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament. “Myth” appears in a vernacular translation: the Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint.

Sirach 20:19 reads: “An ungracious man is like a story [Greek: *mythos*] told at the wrong time, which is continually on the lips of the ignorant.” Sirach is part of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament; a section that focuses upon practical advice for daily life. In view of such a focus, myth is discussed in a negative fashion. Baruch 3:23 says: “The sons of Hagar, who seek for understanding on the earth, the merchants of Meraan and Teman, the storytellers [Greek: *mythologoi*] and the seekers for understanding, have not learned the way to wisdom, nor given thought to her paths.” Baruch is part of the Prophetic books. The Prophets were teachers called by God to instruct and exhort to repentance His erring people. Note that Baruch echoes the same truth as Sirach — myth is spoken of in a bad light. The Old Testament speaks unfavorably about myth.

Looking to the New Testament, we discover that myth bodes far worse than in the Old Testament. “Myth” appears in five places: 1 Timothy 1:4; 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:4; Titus 1:14; and 2 Peter 1:16. In every occurrence, the word is used in a pejorative sense. The Pauline passages are given below with some context:

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths [Greek: muthois] and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith (1 Tim. 1:3-4).

If you put these instructions before the brethren, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the good doctrine which you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths [Greek: muthous]. Train yourself in godliness (1 Tim. 4:6-7).

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths [Greek: muthous] (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

For there are many insubordinate men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially the circumcision party; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for base gain what they have no right to teach. One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, instead of giving heed to Jewish myths [Greek: muthois] or to commands of men who reject the truth (Tit. 1:10-14).

The passages above are from St. Paul's pastoral epistles. These divine letters address doctrinal matters and their pastoral implications. They were written by one bishop (St. Paul) to two others (Ss. Timothy and Titus), both of whom were St. Paul's spiritual sons. Clearly, the Apostle contrasts "myth" with good doctrine, divine training, faith, instructions, godliness, sound teaching, and truth.

The last occurrence of myth in the New Testament comes from Pope Saint Peter:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths [Greek: muthois] when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with Him on the holy mountain (2 Pet 1:16-18).

The texts above refer to Saint Peter's personal observation of Our Lord's Transfiguration, likely atop Mt. Hermon (cf. Mt. 17:1-13; Mk. 9:2-13; Lk.9:28-36). Undoubtedly, the Petrine passages are contrasting a factual event (the Transfiguration) with fabricated tales (myths).

The Biblical evidence alone should end all attempts to bring the concept of “myth” into the field of Biblical studies. However, two more areas need analysis with reference to “myth”: Tradition and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.

Tradition and Myth: Exegesis from the Patristic Epoch

The Church Fathers are an integral component to Tradition, and will provide key insights. The Fathers treated “myth” in two ways: through direct exegesis of the specific biblical passages, or by making indirect comments while addressing other passages or theological topics. Because of the immensity of the patristic literature, we must restrict our selections to a limited number of Fathers.

St. John Chrysostom exegetes “myth” in 1 Timothy 1:4 as “inventions and forgeries and counterfeit doctrines” (Homilies on First Timothy 1). Theodore of Mopsuestia understands “myth” in 1 Timothy 4:7 to mean St. Paul is “rejecting apocryphal books that profess to contain his teaching or that of other apostles but that are really misrepresentations” (Commentary on First Timothy). St. Augustine hearkens back to the “myth” in 2 Timothy 4:4 when discussing heretics who “color the impertinencies of their inventions” (Tractate on John 97.3-4). Theodoret of Cyr treats “myth” in Titus 1:14 as a false “interpretation of the law put forward by the Jews” (Interpretation of the Letter to Titus). St. Bede the Venerable construes “myth” in 2 Peter 1:16 as referring to pagans and heretics who “paid no attention to the teaching of Scripture but by wrongly interpreting it did their best to twist it to suit their own falsehoods” (On 2 Peter). Even with their exegetical variations, the Fathers above are united in criticizing “myth.”

The Magisterium and Myth: The Church Pronouncements

The pertinent Magisterial texts surveyed will be those that have official Latin texts that appeared in the Acta Sanctae Sedis (ASS; 1865-1909) or Acta Apostolicae Sedes (AAS; 1909ff). This limits our survey to 1964: the few post-1964 pronouncements that are applicable have yet to appear in the AAS, preventing a careful verification of terms from the official Latin texts. The Magisterial extracts we do cite require no comment and agree with Scripture and Tradition.

Pope Pius IX’s Quanta Cura with the attached Syllabus of Errors No.7 (1864) condemns the following proposition:

The prophecies and miracles set forth and recorded in the Sacred Scriptures are the fiction of poets, and the mysteries of the Christian faith the result of philosophical investigations. In the books of the Old and the New Testament there are contained mythical inventions [Latin: mythica continentur inventa], and Jesus Christ is Himself a myth [Latin: mythica fictio].

The First Vatican Council's Dei Filius introduction (1870):

Even the holy Bible itself [among sects], which was earlier held to be the sole font and judge of faith, began to be regarded no longer as divine, but to be reckoned among the fabrications of mythology [Latin: imo mythicis commentis accenseri coeperunt].

Pope Leo XIII's Providentissimus Deus No. 10 (1893):

They [Rationalists] deny that there is any such thing as revelation or inspiration, or Holy Scripture at all; they see, instead, only the forgeries and the falsehoods of men; they set down the Scripture narratives as stupid fables and lying stories: the prophecies and the oracles of God are to them either predictions made up after the event or forecasts formed by the light of nature; the miracles and the wonders of God's power are not what they are said to be, but the startling effects of natural law, or else mere tricks and myths [Latin: mythos]; and the Apostolic Gospels and writings are not the work of the Apostles at all.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission's On the Historical Character of the First Three Chapters of Genesis (1909):

Question: Whether we may, in spite of the character and historic form of the book of Genesis, of the close connection of the first three chapters with one another and with those which follow, of the manifold testimony of the Scriptures both of the Old and the New Testament, of the almost unanimous opinion of the Fathers, and of the traditional view which — transmitted also by the Jewish people — has always been held by the Church, teach that the three aforesaid chapters do not contain the narrative of things which actually happened, a narrative which corresponds to objective reality and historic truth; and whether we may teach that these chapters contain fables derived from mythologies [Latin: mythologiis] . . . Answer: In the negative to each part.

Pope Pius XII's Humani Generis No. 39 (1950):

Therefore, whatever of the popular narrations have been inserted into the Sacred Scriptures must in no way be considered on a par with myths [Latin: mythologiis] or other such things, which are more the product of an extravagant imagination than of that striving for truth and simplicity which in the Sacred Books, also of the Old Testament, is so apparent that our ancient sacred writers must be admitted to be clearly superior to the ancient profane writers.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission's Sancta Mater Ecclesia No. II, 2 (1964):

The Apostles rendered testimony to Jesus, announcing first and foremost the Lord's death and resurrection. They faithfully set forth His life and His words, adapting the format of their preaching to the condition of their audience. When Jesus rose from the dead and His divinity became manifest, faith by no means obliterated the memory of the events

which had taken place. On the contrary it reinforced these memories, because it rested on the things which Jesus had taught and done. Nor did their worship of Jesus as Lord and Son of God transform Him into a "mythological" figure [Latin: mythicam personam], or distort His teaching.

Conclusion

Divine Revelation and "myth" are irreconcilable. The Bible mentions "myth" in a negative light. Tradition, via the Church Fathers, criticizes the term and concept of "myth." The Magisterium of the Catholic Church, in numerous official pronouncements, has not employed in a positive way the term or concept of "myth." "Myth" has a place in secular literature, but no home in the Catholic Faith.

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