

*Genesis as
Myth*

AND OTHER ESSAYS

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GENESIS AS MYTH*

A distinguished German theologian has defined myth as 'the expression of unobservable realities in terms of observable phenomena.'¹ All stories which occur in the Bible are myths for the devout Christian, whether they correspond to historical fact or not. All human societies have myths in this sense, and normally the myths to which the greatest importance is attached are those which are the least probable. The non-rationality of myth is its very essence, for religion requires a demonstration of faith by the suspension of critical doubt. *

But if myths do not mean what they appear to mean, how do they come to mean anything at all? What is the nature of the esoteric mode of communication by which myth is felt to give 'expression to unobservable realities'?

This is an old problem which has lately taken on a new shape because, if myth be a mode of communication, then a part of the theory which is embodied in digital computer systems ought to be relevant. The merit of this approach is that it draws special attention to precisely those features of myth which have formerly been regarded as accidental defects. It is common to all mythological systems that all important stories recur in several different versions. Man is created in Genesis (i. 27) and then he is created all over again (ii. 7). And, as if two first men were not

*References such as (iv. 3) refer to the third verse of the fourth chapter of the book of Genesis (English Authorized Version) unless otherwise stated.

enough, we also have Noah in chapter viii. Likewise in the New Testament, why must there be four gospels each telling the 'same' story yet sometimes flatly contradictory on details of fact? Another noticeable characteristic of mythical stories is their markedly binary aspect; myth is constantly setting up opposing categories: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth'; 'They crucified Him and two others with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst'; 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the end, saith the Lord.' So always it is in myth – God against the world and the world itself for ever dividing into opposites on either side: male and female, living and dead, good and evil, first and last ...

Now, in the language of communication engineers, the first of these common characteristics of myth is called *redundancy*, while the second is strongly reminiscent of the unit of information – the *bit*. 'Information' in this technical sense is a measure of the freedom of choice in selecting a message. If there are only two messages and it is arbitrary which you choose then 'information is unity', that is = 1 bit.*²

Communication engineers employ these concepts for the analysis of problems which arise when a particular individual (the sender) wishes to transmit a coded message correctly to another individual (the receiver) against a background of interference (noise). 'Information' refers on the one hand to the degrees of choice open to the sender in encoding his transmission, and on the other to the degrees of choice open to the receiver in interpreting what he receives (which will include noise in addition to the original transmitted signal). In this situation a high level of redundancy makes it easy to correct errors introduced by noise.

* Bit stands for 'binary digit'.

Now in the mind of the believer, myth does indeed convey messages which are the Word of God. To such a man the redundancy of myth is a very reassuring fact. Any particular myth in isolation is like a coded message badly snarled up with noisy interference. Even the most confident devotee might feel a little uncertain as to what precisely is being said. But, as a result of redundancy, the believer can feel that, even when the details vary, each alternative version of a myth confirms his understanding and reinforces the essential meaning of all the others.

The anthropologist's viewpoint is different. He rejects the idea of a supernatural sender. He observes only a variety of possible receivers. Here redundancy increases information – that is the uncertainty of the possible means of decoding the message. This explains what is surely the most striking of all religious phenomena – the passionate adherence to sectarian belief. The whole of Christendom shares a single corpus of mythology so it is surely very remarkable that the members of each particular Christian sect are able to convince themselves that they alone possess the secret of revealed truth. The abstract propositions of communication theory help us to understand this paradox.

But if the true believer can interpret his own mythology in almost any way he chooses, what principle governs the formation of the original myth? Is it random chance that a myth assumes one pattern rather than another? The binary structure of myth suggests otherwise.

Binary oppositions are intrinsic to the process of human thought. Any description of the world must discriminate categories in the form 'p is what not-p is not'. An object is alive or not alive and one could not formulate the concept 'alive' except as the converse of its partner 'dead'. So also human beings are male

or not male, and persons of the opposite sex are either available as sexual partners or not available. Universally these are the most fundamentally important oppositions in all human experience.

Religion everywhere is preoccupied with the first, the antinomy of life and death. Religion seeks to deny the binary link between the two words; it does this by creating the mystical idea of 'another world', a land of the dead where life is perpetual. The attributes of this other world are necessarily those which are not of this world; imperfection here is balanced by perfection there. But this logical ordering of ideas has a disconcerting consequence – God comes to belong to the other world. The central 'problem' of religion is then to re-establish some kind of bridge between Man and God.

This pattern is built into the structure of every mythical system; the myth first discriminates between gods and men and then becomes preoccupied with the relations and intermediaries which link men and gods together. This much is already implicit in our initial definition.

So too with sex relations. Every human society has rules of incest and exogamy. Though the rules vary they always have the implication that for any particular male individual all women are divided by at least one binary distinction, there are women of *our kind* with whom sex relations would be incestuous and there are women of the *other kind* with whom sex relations are allowed. But here again we are immediately led into paradox. How was it in the beginning? If our first parents were persons of two kinds, what was that other kind? But if they were both of our kind, then their relations must have been incestuous and we are all born in sin. The myths of the world offer many different solutions to this childish

intellectual puzzle, but the prominence which it receives shows that it entails the most profound moral issues. The crux is as before. If the logic of our thought leads us to distinguish *we* from *they*, how can we bridge the gap and establish social and sexual relations with 'the others' without throwing our categories into confusion?

So, despite all variations of theology, this aspect of myth is a constant. In every myth system we will find a persistent sequence of binary discriminations as between human/superhuman, mortal/immortal, male/female, legitimate/illegitimate, good/bad ... followed by a 'mediation' of the paired categories thus distinguished.

'Mediation' (in this sense) is always achieved by introducing a third category which is 'abnormal' or 'anomalous' in terms of ordinary 'rational' categories. Thus myths are full of fabulous monsters, incarnate gods, virgin mothers. This middle ground is abnormal, non-natural, holy. It is typically the focus of all taboo and ritual observance.

This approach to myth analysis derives originally from the techniques of structural linguistics associated with the name of Roman Jakobson⁸ but is more immediately due to Claude Lévi-Strauss, one of whose examples may serve to illustrate the general principle.

Certain Pueblo Indian myths focus on the opposition between life and death. In these myths we find a threefold category distinction: agriculture (means to life), war (means to death), and hunting (a mediating category since it is means to life for men but means to death for animals). Other myths of the same cluster deploy a different triad: grass-eating animals (which live without killing), predators (which live by killing), and carrion-eating creatures (mediators, since they eat meat but do not kill in order to eat). In accumulation

this total set of associated symbols serves to imply that life and death are *not* just the back and the front of the same penny, that death is *not* the necessary consequence of life.⁴

My Fig. 1 has been designed to display an analogous structure for the case of the first four chapters of Genesis. The three horizontal bands of the diagram correspond to (i) the story of the seven-day creation, (ii) the story of the Garden of Eden, and (iii) the story of Cain and Abel. The diagram can also be read vertically: column 1 in band (ii) corresponds to column 1 in band (i) and so on. The detailed analysis is as follows:—

UPPER BAND

First Day. (i. 1–5; not on diagram). Heaven distinguished from Earth; Light from Darkness; Day from Night; Evening from Morning.

Second Day. (i. 6–8; col. 1 of diagram). (Fertile) water (rain) above; (infertile) water (sea) below. Mediated by firmament (sky).

Third Day. (i. 9–10; col. 2 and i. 11–12; col. 3). Sea opposed to dry land. Mediated by 'grass, herb-yielding seed (cereals), fruit trees'. These grow on dry land but need water. They are classed as things 'whose seed is in itself' and thereby contrasted with bisexual animals, birds, etc.

The creation of the world as a static (that is, dead) entity is now complete and this whole phase of the creation is opposed to the creation of moving (that is, living) things.

Fourth Day. (i. 13–18; col. 4). Mobile sun and moon are placed in the fixed firmament of col. 1. Light and darkness become alternations (life and death become alternates).

Fifth Day. (i. 20–3; col. 5). Fish and birds are living things corresponding to the sea/land opposition of col. 2 but they also mediate the col. 1 oppositions between sky and earth and between salt water and fresh water.

Sixth Day. (i. 24–5; col. 6). Cattle (domestic animals), beasts (wild animals), creeping things. These correspond to the static triad of col. 3. But only the grass is allocated to the animals. Everything else, including the meat of the animals, is for Man's use (i. 29–30). Later at Leviticus xi creatures which do not fit this exact ordering of the world – for instance water creatures with no fins, animals and birds which eat meat or fish, etc. – are classed as 'abominations'. Creeping Things are anomalous with respect to the major categories, Fowl, Fish, Cattle, Beast, and are thus abominations *ab initio* (Leviticus xi. 41–2). This classification in turn leads to an anomalous contradiction. In order to allow the Israelites to eat locusts the author of Leviticus xi had to introduce a special qualification to the prohibition against eating creeping things: 'Yet these ye *may* eat: of every flying creeping thing that goeth on all four which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth' (v. 21). The procedures of binary discrimination could scarcely be carried further!

(i. 26–7; col. 7). Man and Woman are created simultaneously.

The whole system of living creatures is instructed to 'be fruitful and multiply', but the problems of Life versus Death, and Incest versus Procreation are not faced at all.

CENTRE BAND

The Garden of Eden story which now follows tackles from the start these very problems which have been

evaded in the first version. We start again with the opposition Heaven versus Earth, but this is mediated by a fertilizing mist drawn from the dry infertile earth (ii. 4-6). This theme, which blurs the distinction life/death, is repeated. Living Adam is formed from the dead dust of the ground (ii. 7); so are the animals (ii. 19); the garden is fertilized by a river which 'went out of Eden' (ii. 10); finally fertile Eve is formed from a rib of infertile Adam (ii. 22-3).

The opposition Heaven/Earth is followed by further oppositions - Man/Garden (ii. 15); Tree of Life/Tree of Death (ii. 9, 17); the latter is called the tree of the 'knowledge of good and evil' which means the knowledge of sexual difference.

Recurrent also is the theme that unity in the other world (Eden, Paradise) becomes duality in this world. Outside Eden the river splits into four and divides the world into separate lands (ii. 10-14). In Eden, Adam can exist by himself, Life can exist by itself; in this world, there are men and women, life and death. This repeats the contrast between monosexual plants and bisexual animals which is stressed in the first story.

The other living creatures are now created specifically because of the loneliness of Man in Eden (ii. 18). The categories are Cattle, Birds, Beasts. None of these are adequate as a helpmeet for Man. So finally Eve is drawn from Adam's rib ... 'they are of one flesh' (ii. 18-24).

Comparison of Band 1 and Band 2 at this stage shows that Eve in the second story replaces the 'Creeping Things' of the first story. Just as Creeping Things were anomalous with respect to Fish, Fowl, Cattle and Beast so Eve is anomalous to the opposition Man versus Animal. And, as a final mediation (chapter iii), the Serpent, a creeping thing, is anomalous to the opposition Man versus Woman.

Christian artists have always been sensitive to this fact; they manage to give the monster a somewhat hermaphrodite appearance while still indicating some kind of identification between the Serpent and Eve herself. Hugo Van der Goes, in 'The Fall' at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, puts Eve and the Serpent in the same posture. Michaelangelo makes Adam and Eve both gaze with loving adoration on the Serpent, but the Serpent has Eve's face.⁵

Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and become aware of sexual difference; death becomes inevitable (iii. 3-8). But now for the first time pregnancy and reproduction become possible. Eve does not become pregnant until after she has been expelled from Paradise (iv. 1).

LOWER BAND

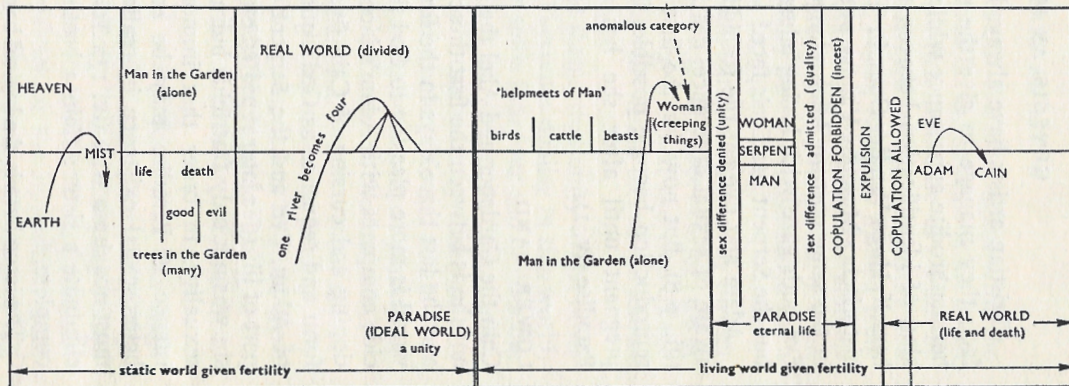
Cain the Gardener and Abel the Herdsman repeat the antithesis between the first three days of the Creation and the last three days in the first story. Abel's living world is more pleasing to God (iv. 4-5). Cain's fratricide compares with Adam's incest and so God's questioning and cursing of Cain (iv. 9-12) has the same form and sequence as God's questioning and cursing of Adam, Eve and the Serpent (ii. 9-19). The latter part of iii. 16 is later repeated exactly (iv. 7), so Cain's sin was not only fratricide but also incestuous homosexuality. In order that immortal monosexual existence in Paradise may be exchanged for fertile heterosexual existence in reality, Cain, like Adam, must acquire a wife (iv. 17). To this end Adam must eliminate a sister: Cain a brother. The symmetry is complete.

The issue here is the logical basis of incest categories and closely analogous patterns must occur in all mythologies regardless of their superficial content.

Genesis i. 1-
ii. 3
and v. 1-8

static world (death)				moving world (life)			
1	2	3		4	5	6	7
2nd day	3rd day			4th day	5th day	6th day	
'waters above' (rain)				(life-death alternation)			
firmament (sky)				sun (day) moon (night)	birds		
'waters below' (ocean)	land sea	grass	cereals	fruit trees		cattle	beasts
						'creeping things'	Man and Woman
							→ SETH → ENOS

Genesis ii. 4
Genesis iv. 1



Genesis iv. 2-16

	LIFE	moving world	cattle sheep	ABEL (herdsman)	WEST (death) static	FRATRICIDE EXPULSION COPULATION	EAST (life) mobile
	DEATH	static world	cereals	CAIN (gardener)	men without women in Eden		men with women in Nod (wandering)

Additional details: 'Cain's wife' is shown between Cain and Enoch. A curved arrow connects Cain and Enoch.

Fig 1 The four chapters of Genesis contain three separate creation stories. Horizontal bands correspond to (a) seven-day creation; (b) Garden of Eden; and (c) Cain and Abel. Each story sets up the opposi-

tion Death versus Life, God versus Man. World is 'made alive' by using categories of 'woman' and 'creeping thing' to mediate this opposition

Cross-cultural comparison becomes easier if we represent the analysis as a systematic pattern of binary discriminations as in Fig. 2.

Adam/Eve and Cain/Abel are then seen to be variants of a theme which can also occur in other forms, as in the well-known myth of Oedipus. The actual symbolism in these two cases is nearly identical. Oedipus, like Adam and Cain, is initially earthbound and immobile. The conclusion of the Athenian version of the Oedipus story is that he is an exiled wanderer, protected by the gods. So also is Cain (iv. 14-15). The Bible also includes the converse of this pattern. In Genesis xxviii Jacob is a lonely exile and wanderer under God's protection, but (xxxii. 24-32) he is renamed Israel and thus given the status of a first ancestor with a territorial autochthonous base, and he is tamed by God. Although Jacob dies abroad in Egypt he is buried on his own ancestral soil in Israel (xl. 29-32; l. 5-7).

In the Oedipus story, in place of Eve's Serpent we have Jocasta's Sphinx. Like Jocasta the Sphinx is female, like Jocasta the Sphinx commits suicide, like the Serpent the Sphinx leads men to their doom by verbal cunning, like the Serpent the Sphinx is an anomalous monster. Eve listens to the Serpent's words and betrays Adam into incest; Oedipus solves the Sphinx riddle and is led into incest. Again, Oedipus's patricide replaces Cain's fratricide - Oedipus, incidentally, meets Laius 'at a cross roads'.

Parallels of this kind seem too close to be accidental, but this kind of algebra is unfamiliar and more evidence will be needed to convince the sceptical. Genesis contains several further examples of first ancestors.

Firstly, Noah survived the destruction of the world by flood together with three sons and their wives.

Prior to this the population of the world had included three kinds of being - 'sons of God', 'daughters of men' and 'giants' who were the offspring of the union of the other two (vi. 1-4). Since the forbears of Noah's daughters-in-law have all been destroyed by the Flood, Noah becomes a unique ancestor of all mankind without the implication of incest. Chapter ix. 1-7 addressed to Noah is almost the duplicate of i. 27-30 addressed to Adam.

Though heterosexual incest is evaded, the theme of homosexual incest in the Cain and Abel story recurs in the Noah saga when drunken Noah is seduced by his own son Ham (ix. 21-5). The Canaanites, descendants of Ham, are for this reason accursed. (That a homosexual act is intended is evident from the language 'Ham saw the nakedness of his father'. Compare Leviticus xviii. 6-19, where 'to uncover the nakedness of' consistently means to have sexual relations with.)

In the second place Lot survives the destruction of the world by fire together with two nubile daughters. Drunken Lot is seduced by his own daughters (xix. 30-8). The Moabites and the Ammonites, descendants of these daughters, are for this reason accursed. In chapter xix the men of Sodom endeavour to have homosexual relations with two angels who are visiting Lot. Lot offers his nubile daughters instead but they escape unscathed. The implication is that Lot's incest is less grave than heterosexual relations with a foreigner, and still less grave than homosexual relations.

Thirdly, the affair of the Sodomites and the Angels contains echoes of 'the sons of God' and 'the daughters of men' but links superficially with chapter xviii where Abraham receives a visit from God and two angels who promise that his ageing and barren wife

Sarah shall bear a son. Sarah is Abraham's half-sister by the same father (xx. 12) and his relations with her are unambiguously incestuous (Leviticus xviii. 9). Abraham loans Sarah to Pharaoh saying that she is his sister (xii. 19). He does the same with King Abimelech (xx. 2). Isaac repeats the game with Abimelech (xxxvi. 9-11) but with a difference. Isaac's wife Rebekah is his father's brother's son's daughter (second

Perfect ideal categories	Confused anomalous categories (sacred)	Imperfect real categories
HEAVEN The other world Paradise, Eden Things by themselves LIGHT DAY DARKNESS NIGHT DUST Life by itself Immortality Good by itself Unity ONE RIVER Things whose seed is in themselves CEREALS FRUIT GRASS	FIRMAMENT Sky Death Evil CREEPING THINGS	EARTH This world Things in pairs DAY+SUN NIGHT+MOON Air BIRDS Sea FISH Freshwater Land PLANTS Life+Death Mortality Good+Evil Division FOUR RIVERS Things with two sexes CATTLE BEASTS
Dust—MAN (by himself)	ADAM brother EVE sister SERPENT incest CAIN fratricide ABEL homosexual incest	Meat Cattle
Cereals	EXPULSION FROM PARADISE	EAST Beginning of real life in real world Adam+Eve (as wife) Cain+Wife Procreation
WEST		

Fig 2 Incest categories have a logical basis in all myths. Similarity between myths is seen most clearly if they are analysed in a binary form as shown in this table

cousin) and the relation is *not* in fact incestuous. The barrenness of Sarah is an aspect of her incest. The supernatural intervention which ultimately ensures that she shall bear a child is evidence that the incest is condoned. Pharaoh and Abimelech both suffer supernatural penalties for the lesser offence of adultery, but Abraham, the incestuous husband, survives unscathed.

There are other stories in the same set. Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave, bears a son Ishmael to Abraham whose descendants are wanderers of low status. Sarah's son Isaac is marked out as of higher status than the sons of Abraham's concubines, who are sent away to 'the east country' (c.f. wandering Cain who made his home in Nod 'eastward of Eden'). Isaac marries a kinswoman in preference to a Canaanite woman. Esau's marriage to a Hittite woman is marked as a sin. In contrast his younger and favoured twin brother Jacob marries two daughters of his mother's brother who is in turn Jacob's father's father's brother's son's son.

All in all, this long series of repetitive and inverted tales asserts:

- (a) the overriding virtue of close kin endogamy;
- (b) that the sacred hero-ancestor Abraham can carry this so far that he marries his paternal half-sister (an incestuous relationship). Abraham is thus likened to Pharaoh, for the Pharaohs of Egypt regularly married their paternal half-sisters; and
- (c) that a rank order is established which places the tribal neighbours of the Israelites in varying degrees of inferior status depending upon the nature of the defect in their original ancestry as compared with the pure descent of Jacob (Israel).

The myth requires that the Israelites be descended

unambiguously from Terah the father of Abraham. This is achieved only at the cost of a breach of the incest rule; but by reciting a large number of similar stories which entail even greater breaches of sexual morality the relations of Abraham and Sarah finally stand out as uniquely virtuous. Just as Adam and Eve are virtuous as compared to Cain and Abel, so Abraham's incest can pass unnoticed in the context of such outrageous characters as Ham, Lot's daughters, and the men of Sodom.

I have concentrated here upon the issue of sexual rules and transgressions so as to show how a multiplicity of repetitions, inversions and variations can add up to a consistent 'message'. I do not wish to imply that this is the only structural pattern which these myths contain.

The novelty of the analysis which I have presented does not lie in the facts but in the procedure. Instead of taking each myth as a thing in itself with a 'meaning' peculiar to itself it is assumed, from the start, that every myth is one of a complex and that any pattern which occurs in one myth will recur, in the same or other variations, in other parts of the complex. The structure that is common to all variations becomes apparent when different versions are 'superimposed' one upon the other.

Whenever a corpus of mythology is recited in its religious setting such structural patterns are 'felt' to be present, and convey meaning much as poetry conveys meaning. Even though the ordinary listener is not fully conscious of what has been communicated, the 'message' is there in a quite objective sense. If the labour of programming could be performed the actual analysis could be done by a computer far better than by any human. Furthermore it seems evident that much the same patterns exist in the most diverse kinds

of mythology. This seems to me to be a fact of great psychological, sociological and scientific significance. Here truly are observable phenomena which are the expression of unobservable realities.