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## **The State of Israel, Mythology, and the Valorized Bible**

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### *Abstract*

I argue that the Christian Neo-conservatives (like many before them, including the Medieval crusaders) read the Bible mythologically, and thus uproot the Bible from its traditional moral, theological, historical, and grammatical anchors in service to a specific eschatological vision. This shift is rhetorical in nature in that those receiving the biblical text now are not the same as those who originally received it, nor are they the same as the scholars, theologians, and historians who have been careful to read the text with integrity. The shift in audience is a shift in interpretive communities and thus a shift in text. For, as Stanley Fish has argued, interpretive strategies precede the text, thereby “making them rather than, as it is usually assumed, arising from them” (218). The resultant text is a valorized version that legitimizes very real political and military action.

Even a brief survey of the amount of work done on myth will yield the truth that there are many, many definitions of myth. “Myth is notoriously difficult to define” argues John Gentile because “Myth resists stable boundaries and is, ultimately, an essentially contested concept” (85). And, moreover, “Myths can be made to mean whatever the myth teller wants them to mean, and their rhetorical power can be subjected to the prevailing modes of discourse of a particular era or power elite” (Doty 12). Nevertheless, the term myth does have some meaning. It usually refers to the cultural milieu of stories, concepts, and ideas that give meaning to a particular culture in a particular context.

Generally speaking, however, myths are viewed as large stories of cosmic proportions. They explain the reason the world, humanity, or any other thing integral to human life exists. They are about gods and goddesses. Legends tend to be more regional. They explain how a city was founded, or why that particular mountain is where it is. Legends frequently involve human heroes. Fairy tales are local stories, particular to certain villages or towns. Unlike myths and legends, though, they tend to refrain from naming a recognizable place. Rather, they take place “once upon a time” or “in a land far away.” They feature unnamed characters or, if they are named, they have generic names. For instance, the names Hansel and Gretel may sound odd to Americans, but they were as common to Germany and Austria as Jack and Jill once were for Americans. Fairy tales serve a different purpose than myths (cosmic explanation, history of origins) or legends (cultural explanations, political justifications). They are about how the ordinary person, frequently a child, overcomes a difficult obstacle. These delineations are not perfect, but they are functional. Fairy tales, legends, and myths can all interact with each other and function in relation to each other, resulting in a mythology. Thus, for example, *The Hobbit* is a fairy tale that fits comfortably in the legend of *The Lord of the Rings* which, itself, is a footnote in the grand Tolkien mythos, most holistically found in *The Silmarillion*. In the contemporary American context, however, there is no controlling mythos because:

in a culture that has been homogeneous for some time, there are a number of understood, unwritten rules by which people live. There is an ethos there, there is a mode, an understanding that, “we don’t do it that way.” . . . But in America we

have people from all kinds of backgrounds, all in a cluster, together, and consequently law has become very important in this country. Lawyers and law are what hold us together. . . . What we have today is a demythologized world.

(Campbell 110)

Or, as Doty argues, “Infatuated with scientific and technological advances, we generally preach the myth of mythlessness . . . any even elementary exposure to the history of science discloses how repeatedly scientists have claimed to be 'beyond myth'” (Doty 35). This is because the contemporary American worldview is beholden, still, to modernist rationalism. That is, the American worldview has a clear delineation between fiction and non-fiction, truth and falsehood. What can be known, according to this sensibility, is only what can be derived from use of the five senses.

This worldview tends to reject discovery of formal and final causes, and insists that discovering efficient causes, and especially material causes, is the point of knowledge creation. This means that not much care has gone into understanding the purpose of something, or understanding its essential nature. This worldview is the result of modern science, which has done tremendous good for humanity, but has also placed artificial limits on knowledge. The fundamental understanding of modern science is that the totality of reality is bound up in fact, that somehow one can perceive with her senses, or with her senses through the aid of technology, all there is to truth. The scientific method is exclusively concerned with knowing what and how, but hardly ever asks why.

Moreover, Reader Response Theory, as advanced by Stanley Fish in *Interpreting the Variorum*, addresses the way the reader of a text controls the meaning of that text. For Fish, the word “text” itself is problematic in that it presupposes the existence of an objective, unified whole capable of being read—which for Fish means “pure (that is, disinterested) perception”—by more than one person (217). Rather, for Fish, interpretive strategies precede the text, thereby “making them rather than, as it is usually assumed, arising from them” (218). Disinterested reading is impossible because, even in choosing to read a particular text, an interpretive decision has been made—that the text in question is a unified whole that can be read as such. Fish contends that this use of the same interpretive strategies is not caused by some objective set of

values. Rather, it is the result of reading conventions held together in interpretive communities. Fish argues, “Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (219). These shared strategies exist prior to the texts under consideration. And, just like the strategies of interpretation, these interpretive communities also fluctuate. The reason texts can be debated is “not because of the stability of the texts, but because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities and therefore in the opposing positions they make possible” (220). Thus, any investigation of myth in a specifically contemporary American context will need to focus on the way that myth functions for different groups within society—different groups that nevertheless hold to a rationalist worldview. The implication being, of course, that differing interpretive communities will understand the same mythological stories differently from each other, with the result being different emphases and truth constructions.

Some religious communities will receive mythological stories as essentially factual—relying as they do on a scientific understanding of truth. Such communities may accept a literal six-day creation, a young earth, or spontaneous generation in opposition to the theory of Evolution. Scholarly communities are more likely to receive mythological texts as stories that inform us about ancient cultures. Children, to name a different type of community, are more likely to receive mythological texts as fantastic stories unconcerned with culture or facts, much like fairy tales. Children will identify the similarity between stories about the Greek gods and their favorite superheroes. This is the reason, for example, for the success of TV shows like *The Book of Virtues* or Disney’s *Hercules*. These stories are thus transformed into acceptable forms for children.

Take, for instance, the story of Samson from the book of Judges in the Old Testament as it appears in children's Bibles. If we are going to entertain the thought that mythological stories (including those in the Bible) can function as fairytales for some people, then the form in which the child first encounters the story is relatively important. While I am certain that the adult version in the Bible contains the necessary elements of a fairytale, the fact that we have separated the Bible off into stories and put them in books that function as collections of stories

indicates our acceptance of them as fairytale-esque. Moreover, children are unlikely to think about the story of Samson in terms all that different from Disney movies or Saturday morning cartoons. They want to have super strength like Samson just like they want magic like Merlin and robot dinosaurs like the Power Rangers. In any case, the form in which most modern American children hear Bible stories—whether from a book of them like I did or just in Sunday school—is a reductive form of the original that truncates big words and concepts so that children can understand. In this, the presentation of Bible stories is closely aligned with fairytales. If one reads the story of Samson as it appears in the Bible, one will notice that it fits loosely into the overarching narrative of the book of Judges (McKenzie 58-9). Actually, Samson is not a whole lot like the judges who came before him since he was not a very good person and spent most of his time trying to kill people (though this is partly the point of the story—explaining how Israel headed downhill and why they needed a monarchy).

In any case, Samson has a definite beginning and a definite ending, and the story takes place in a definite location. In this, the original seems more like a legend than a fairytale. But think about the way a modern American child might hear the story. Or, really, think about the way a modern American adult might hear the story. Even if the story of Samson functioned as a legend for ancient Israel and helped explain the origins of the monarchy or the enmity with the Philistines, it is not a legend for contemporary American culture. It is an accident of history that we have maintained written record of an ancient Near Eastern culture thousands of years removed from ours. While many of us may have encountered Gilgamesh in school, our mothers probably didn't read us legends about him before we went to bed each night. So, we have preserved stories like the legend of Samson for religious reasons, but we don't exactly know what to do with them because they don't function as legends for us. We may try to make them history, but mostly we make them fairytales.

Before jumping specifically into the story of Samson, I will present Tolkien's necessary requirements for fairytales. It will then be my argument that the story of Samson meets these criteria: 1) Fantasy. The story must take place in a world where the observed, scientific facts of our world don't hold sway all of the time. For Tolkien, creating a fantasy world is about the act of sub-creation, a way in which people demonstrate the way they are made *Imago Dei*. 2)

Recovery. The main character(s) regain clear sight at the end, having struggled with doubt and darkness. 3) Escape. The story must allow the reader to enter the fantasy world—to escape from the doldrums of modern life. At its deepest level, fairy tales are about escaping death. 4) Eucatastrophe. Tolkien coined this word. By it, he means the good catastrophe. That is, contrary to tragedy, there must be a sudden, joyful turn. The result is a happy ending. Tolkien maintains that this is the most central part of the fairy tale.

As for the story of Samson, I would argue that the first cannon is easily identifiable. The scientific facts do not seem to apply all of the time. Samson possesses supernatural strength, and this strength is arbitrarily tied to the length of his hair. He is able to rip lions in half, kill thousands of people with the jawbone of an ass, and pull an entire temple to the ground. Moreover, to the child, the land in which this takes place is the magical land of Israel (or as I grew up calling it, the Bible land), the same place that other magical stories take place (Jonah, Noah, and Elijah, to name just a few). Moreover, the “once upon a time”-ness gives it the feeling of fantasy (I grew up calling this the Bible times). Thus, the story of Samson takes place in “Bible times” in the “Bible land”—clearly fantasy. Second, recovery also seems to occur. The meat of the story is Samson’s struggle against the Philistines. In the last third of the story, he falls for Delilah. After she figures out the secret of his strength, cuts his hair, and has him arrested and tied up by the Philistines, Samson finally experiences recovery. Gaining clarity and praying to God, his magical strength is returned to him. He is able to accomplish more in his final breath than he was during the entirety of his life. Third, escape is about the reader/hearer, not about the characters in the story. For Tolkien—and this is connected to the fourth cannon—fairytales are about escaping death. That is, the reader/hearer is entranced by the fantastic world of the fairytale—she escapes from the doldrums of life into a place where there is magic. This clearly takes place in the Samson story. Pulled in by tales of a man with magic strength who rips lions in half and fights people using a jawbone, the hearer/reader is excited to join in the adventure. The story captures the imagination.

Finally, and for Tolkien the most important, eucatastrophe occurs. In traditional fairytales, this is the part of the story where Hansel and Gretel shove the witch into the oven. It is the sudden, joyful turn of the story: all will work out in the end. In the story of Samson, the

euclastrophe is not a traditional one in that the main character dies, but it occurs nonetheless when Samson accomplishes his task by being given the strength to pull the temple down on the celebrating Philistines. That this is a joyful and not tragic occurrence is evidenced by the fact that his family buried him with honor among his ancestors. He had done what he wanted to do: he had overcome his limitations. Tragedy would have had Samson die an ignominious death at the hands of the Philistines. While receiving this story as a fairytale—especially among children, laypersons, and non-Christians—is a common occurrence, other interpretive communities receive the story in other ways. The scholarly community receives it as an ancient piece of folklore while clergy receive the story as a theological narrative. Thus scholars receive the story in a particular way while churches and preachers receive it in another.

The rhetorical goal of the scholar is to elucidate—usually to an academic audience, though it could be anyone—the historical, literary, anthropological, theological, or scientific context for a particular segment of the Bible. Moreover, scholars may engage in a critical appraisal of the text using ideological criticisms like Feminism, Critical Race Theory, Post-colonialism, Marxism, etc. Take, for example, Susan Niditch (a folklorist). Her primary argument is that the Samson story fits nicely into a mythological type of the superman (154). He encounters overwhelming odds and prevails, he participates in traditional activities like the riddling game (157), and he suffers from a tragic flaw (155). Moreover, Niditch points out the various ways in which the Samson story showcases those items unique to ancient Semitic cultures (158-9). Niditch also explores the treatment of women in the text (168-71). Rhetorically, the sermon serves to form a bridge between the experience of the congregation and the location of the biblical text or, more frequently, the experience of characters within the biblical text. That is, preachers frequently draw from stories in the Bible to admonish, encourage, or teach their congregations. Thus, the texts produced comment on the existing text of the Bible. The scholar has typically devalorized the biblical text by treating it like an ancient document. The preacher in most settings, but especially conservative evangelical settings, treats the biblical text as fully valorized (this is indicative of the modernist paradigm absorbed by fundamentalist and scientist alike in which truth and facts are exactly identified with each other). That is, the text of the Bible is seen as holy, perfect, infallible, inspired, and inerrant. It is treated as penned by

God. People thus tend to draw a distinction between the valorized text and the texts produced that mediate their relationship to the Bible. That is, when a sermon is preached—or when a scholar produces an exegesis—there are two texts in play. The first text is the particular segment of the Bible under evaluation while the second is the sermon or exegesis.

However, a third type of text produced is the children's versions of Bible stories. The purpose of these versions of biblical stories is the communication of the truth of God—as understood in certain religious circles—to the next generation in compelling ways. Walter Neidhart argues that children are drawn to the biblical stories just like they are drawn to other stories because the Bible contains all of the same forms and mythologies present in other types of story (113). He explains that the reason adolescents do not stick around to become members of the church for two reasons. The first is because the adults have a dry and boring faith. The second is because religious instruction is terribly boring. It serves the purpose of drying out and demythologizing the wonderful world of stories the child once knew (114-5). The solution, advocated by Neidhart, is to embrace a narrative approach to religious education and exegesis, hence the focus on children's versions of the Bible (117).

These versions are not merely commentaries on the valorized text. They subsume the valorized text. That is, they collapse the distinction between texts produced by modern people that comment in some way on the Bible and the Bible itself—they become the Bible, at least for some children. This is similar to what occurs in translations: people treat English translations of the Bible as the Bible, but they are not the Bible. They are translations, and translations inevitably reflect bias. A children's version of a Bible story is a translation of the English version into a form suitable for children. The story is then treated as the Bible. It is in translation into kid form that the Bible stories become fairytales.

The way I have presented the information is from the top down—exegesis, then sermons, and then children's versions. But that's not the order in which people typically receive the biblical text, if they grow up in church. I know that I was first told Bible stories (like Samson), then I heard and understood sermons, then, in college, I came into contact with scholarly treatments of the biblical text. What happens when children start with children's versions of the Bible stories? Children receive the biblical text as fairytales on par with Disney, Pixar, and Snow

White. But when kids start hearing sermons that have completely valorized the biblical text—drawing moral lessons from their fairytales, as it were—they come to believe that the Bible happens to be a true story, as opposed to all of the false stories they have been told growing up. This absorption of the Bible stories as literally true has, like for the children discussed above, inspired many post-biblical audiences to construct their own myths and legends related to the scriptures.

Christianity takes many forms but, throughout time, much of its focus has been on what happens when people die. Salvation is frequently viewed as a post-mortem salvation—that if one believes, one can live forever after death with God. But, if one does not believe, then one will live forever after death in Hell. Thus, in such systems, the last thing that happens before either eternal bliss or eternal suffering is the judgment of God on all people. Matthew and assorted scenes in Revelation (esp. Rev 20) are frequently invoked to describe this phenomenon. Now, of course, this is only possible if the Christian account of creation is accurate: if a pre-existent God imbued matter with eternal souls. Thus, central to the primary aim of much Christianity (post-mortem salvation of souls) are origin and ending myths.

Myths frequently function within a specific culture and historical location even though their subject matter is usually universal in nature. For example, in the Greek myth of Prometheus, the actions taken by Prometheus are viewed as universal (he didn't just make Greeks; the Greeks aren't the only ones with fire) but his name is Greek, was worshipped in Athens, and was punished by being chained to a rock in the mountain range between the Black and Caspian seas. Moreover, myths assume the worldview of the myth-telling culture. Thus, in a pre-scientific Greek society, the idea of a titan like Prometheus stealing fire from Mount Olympus—the home of the gods—is not all that strange. Things like it may not happen everyday, but they are certainly possible.

Contemporary Christians, however, exist in a modern world that has been given a challenge by postmodernity, but nevertheless holds to an essential trust in the ability of science to discover truth. This modernist paradigm (as previously discussed) assumes that truth and fact are the same thing—and that we have an essentially unlimited ability to discover its contents. Nevertheless, Christianity retains its counter-narrative. That is, Christianity views itself as

essentially hostile to the ruling paradigms of the world. Thus, many conservative Christians insist on the biblical creation myth over and against the scientific big-bang myth. Moreover, because contemporary Christians breathe the air of the modern world, they believe that for the biblical creation myth to be true it must be factual in the scientific sense. The reason contemporary Christians hold as tightly as they do to a literal creation account is because, as I mentioned above, its necessity for the central claim of post-mortem salvation to be true.

The same basic idea is true of some contemporary Christian myths of the end. The *Left Behind* series is a good example of the way a contemporary Christian audience has received the apocalyptic texts in the Bible. To most people, the word “apocalypse” has to do with the end of the world. This is because the book of Revelation was once called—and is still called in some communities—John’s Apocalypse; it looked to the normal reader like Revelation was recounting the end of the world. However, the word “apocalypse” means, of course, “revelation,” which is how we have that name for the book now. In any case, Revelation (and Daniel and Ezekiel) is so strange—filled with monsters, dragons, falling stars, and blood-red moons—that most assume it describes the End (partially because a judgment is recounted in them). The writers of the *Left Behind* series—and the pastors and preachers who promulgate Dispensationalist theology—have created a story that takes place in roughly contemporary times in which all of the strange things in those books of the Bible are literally true. Again, this indicates the basic assumption shared across the modern world that truth and scientific/historical facts are the same category.

Another example is the Holy Grail, the object pursued by many in the Arthurian Legendarium, the idea being that Joseph of Arimathea came to England after the ascension of Jesus. He brought the grail with him. This served to give Norman occupied England a sense of history and connection to the prevailing religious sentiments of the day. Ripped straight from the gospels, the Holy Grail became a bejeweled, magical cup. Both the success of Monty Python and of Indiana Jones indicates the continuing success and resonance of this particular legend. Indiana Jones also exhibits the continuing success of the myth of the legend of the Ark of the Covenant.

The Crusades are another example. Fought in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, they were a series of wars waged by Christian Europe over and against Islamic control of the Holy Land (and sometimes against the Orthodox Christians). The Crusades arose out of

the notion that Christian Europe, by right of being Christians, had legitimate ownership of the Holy Land more generally and various sacred spaces within the Holy Land more specifically. Thus, God was invoked to bless the military campaigns. In this case, the legend of Christendom (the political unity of Christian peoples orchestrated by God, connected to the legend of the Christian Roman Empire) justified various military and political ends. Biblical legends have also mattered in America. I will add that the Puritans who founded New England invoked the biblical notion of a city on a hill, a notion that led to a belief in Manifest Destiny. And, even more fascinating, is the Mormon creation of legends about Jesus visiting the Americas and then giving Joseph Smith a special revelation.

Additionally, Zionism (in both its Jewish and Christian varieties, as well as its secular variety) is a legend concerning the same piece of Holy Land desired by the Crusaders. Jewish Zionism is tied directly to the biblical legends concerning the founding of the Kingdom of Israel. Claiming that God gave the Holy Land to a particular ethnic group, Jewish Zionists maintain that the Jewish people today are the heirs to that original covenant. Secular Zionism grasps the religious legend, but invokes the Holocaust as the justification for the existence of the State of Israel. Jews should never be defenseless again, they claim. These two varieties came together in the establishment of Israel in the British mandate of Palestine in 1948. Christian Zionism, a new phenomenon, invokes the same legend that Jewish Zionism does, but it adds notions gleaned from St. John's Apocalypse that the end of time (and thus Jesus' return) won't occur unless Israel is established as a socio-political entity.

The "once-upon-a-time, far-far-away" land of Israel retains the fantastic qualities given it by the fairytale versions of Bible stories, but is now fused with the modernist notion of scientific facts. Thus, the contemporary state of Israel becomes the legitimate heir to the ancient Kingdom of Israel, and thus all of its attendant promises. Just like Joshua was justified in conquering the Promised Land by force, and David was justified in defending it with force, the modern Israeli state is thus justified in its continued oppression of the Palestinian people. And America, as a Christian nation, is justified in aiding God's chosen. The collapse of the distinction between text and commentary that occurs in children's versions is thus a Sign for the collapse between ancient Israel and modern Israel—a collapse with very real military and political consequences.

David Jeffrey, in *People of the Book*, discusses the relationship between the Bible and the American founding legend. Specifically, he traces the notion of American exceptionalism from the Puritans down through Ronald Reagan and contemporary America. The legend being that America is ordained by God to be a light to the nations, the city on a hill that Jesus talked about. Through America's history, there is a strain of thought that connects biblical, eschatological community with America as a socio-political entity. The way the Bible is read in such circumstances, then, is different than how it is read for a spiritual community or as an ancient document: it is read as a constitution of sorts. Numerous examples of this way of reading abound, but the best example is of John Hagee.

John Hagee is the pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, a 19,000-person strong charismatic mega church. He is also the president of Christians United for Israel, a Christian Neoconservative group. In a sermon delivered to the CUFI national conference, Hagee directly invokes the American legend as the basis for his call to action in Israel. By describing America as “the greatest nation on the face of the earth,” Hagee sits comfortably in this tradition, though he does condition America's greatness (there and in other places) on its continued obedience to God. But, the main point of the sermon, and the point I most want to emphasize, is Hagee's invocation of God's blessing on the modern state of Israel. Indeed, out of America's exceptional place in the world should the heralds of truth walk forward with God's truth for Israel.

Hagee reads the covenant to the Israelites in the scriptures as God's continuing covenant to the Jewish people today, of whom the state of Israel is the legitimate representative. Rejecting the notion that the Israelis illegally occupy Palestine, Hagee asserts that one cannot illegally occupy that which one owns. God gave this land to Israel centuries ago, and it is theirs by right. Hagee's hermeneutic is to read the Bible as corresponding on a one to one basis with contemporary categories. So, when Hagee reads the word “Israel” in the Bible, he immediately thinks of the contemporary nation that calls itself “Israel.” Hagee thus serves as an effective spokesman for the political and economic forces that prosper from the continued existence of the status quo. This particular hermeneutic is a prime example of what I have been arguing in this paper. The result is a biblical justification for the apartheid-like military occupation of Palestine.

In the end, of course, no one factor causes unjust conditions against entire people groups.

My argument, though, is that retaining the fairy tale quality of Israel alongside a modernist paradigm has resulted in a way of reading the Bible that gives legitimation to the status quo. In so doing, certain religious communities—knowingly or unknowingly—violate their own ethics, standards, and legitimacy. In the future, I hope that more research is done about the connection between hermeneutic and political reality: it is horrifically true, in this case, that words have power.

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