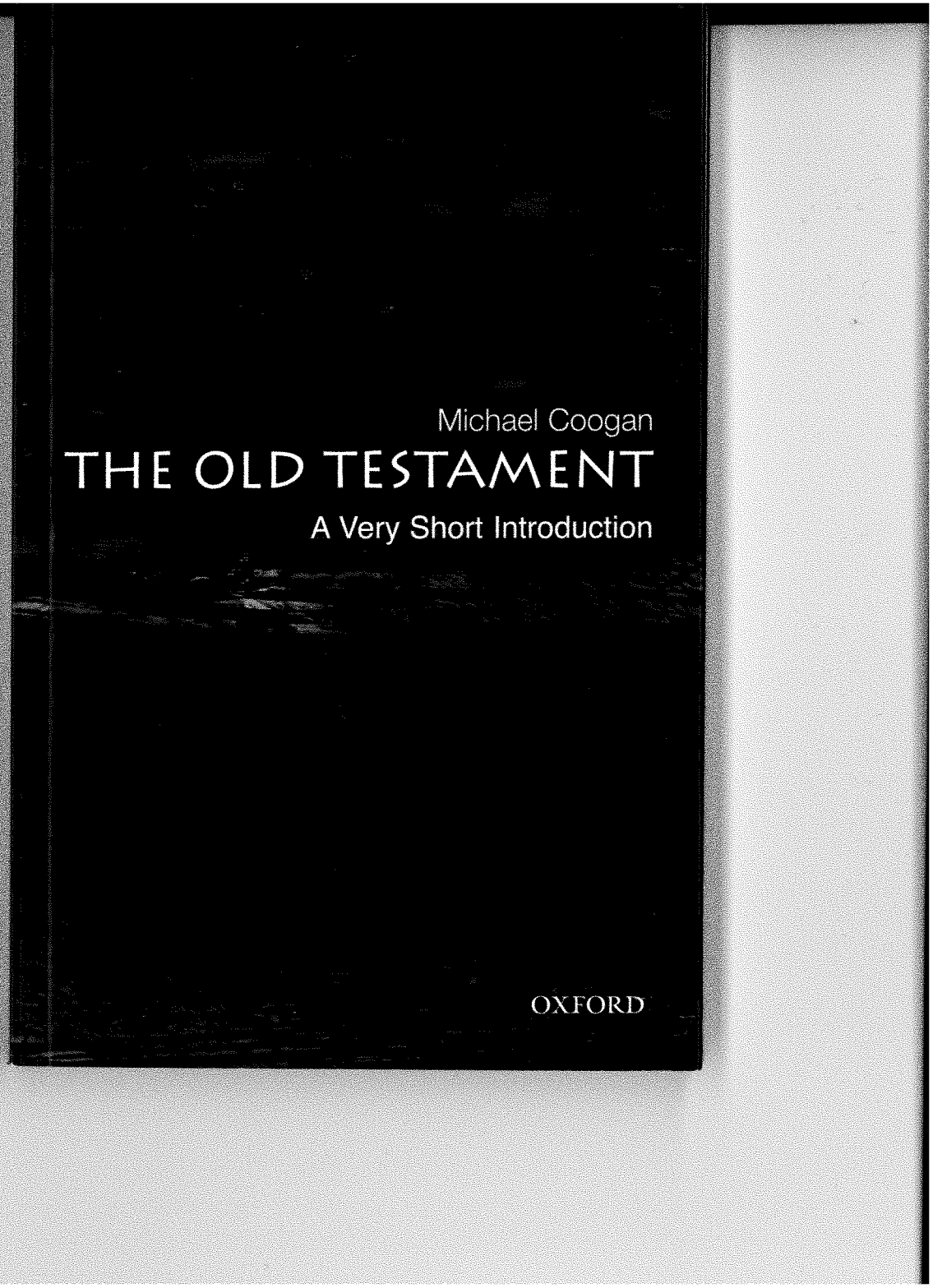
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THE OLD TESTAMENT
A Very Short Introduction
OXFORD

# Chapter 4
# The Old Testament and myth

Among the countless ancient Near Eastern texts discovered, deciphered, and translated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many thousands were identified as myths, and many more contained mythical elements. In its simplest sense, a myth is a narrative—the Greek word *mythos* originally meant story—in either prose or poetry, in which gods and goddesses are the principal characters. Although people sometimes find the idea shocking, the Old Testament is also imbued with myth.

## Myths of origin

All religions seek to explain the unknown, and myths often provide such explanations. How did the world come to be? Why are we here? What will happen to us in the end? These and similar questions are the stuff of myths of origin, and such myths are widespread throughout the ancient Near East, with a bewildering variety of deities and explanations. Generally, the principal deity of a people, a nation, a city, or a region is described as the creator. Creation itself may be described as the result of a sexual act—for example, intercourse leads a goddess to give birth to the Euphrates River, or the land; a god masturbates and swallows his semen, becoming pregnant with his own offspring; or he swallows his father's testicles with the same effect. Such explicit sexuality in myth is not characteristic of the biblical accounts of Yahweh,

although it may well have been present in popular Israelite religion.

A frequently occurring creation myth in the ancient Near East describes the creation of the world as the sequel to a titanic battle between the deity of the primeval chaotic waters and a storm god.

The most elaborate description of a battle between cosmic forces that preceded creation is found in *Enuma Elish*. Also called *The Babylonian Creation Epic*, this is an ancient Mesopotamian hymn in praise of Marduk, the storm god and chief deity of Babylon. Here is an excerpt from its account of the combat between Marduk and Tiamat, the goddess of the primeval sea:

Face to face they came, Tiamat and Marduk, sage of the gods.
They engaged in combat, they closed for battle.
The Lord spread his net and made it encircle her,
To her face he dispatched the *imhullu*-wind, which had been behind:
Tiamat opened her mouth to swallow it,
And he forced in the *imhullu*-wind so that she could not close her lips.
Fierce winds distended her belly;
Her insides were constipated and she stretched her mouth wide.
He shot an arrow which pierced her belly,
Split her down the middle and slit her heart,
Vanquished her and extinguished her life.[1]

After the battle, Marduk formed the sky (the biblical "firmament" or "dome") from Tiamat's corpse, and he set into the sky the planets, moon, and constellations. Finally, with the help of the other gods, using the blood of one of Tiamat's divine allies, he created humans to serve the gods who had supported him.



In Mesopotamia the battle is between Tiamat, a goddess, and Marduk; in Canaan it is between Prince Sea and the god Baal. Elements of this widespread myth also pervade the Bible.

The most familiar account of creation in the Bible, that found at the beginning of Genesis, begins with an allusion to the battle before creation—darkness, as in a great storm cloud, is on the surface of the Deep, and God's wind is swooping over the water (Gen. 1:1–2)—but there is no description of the battle itself. Elsewhere in the Bible, however, the widespread myth of combat preceding creation occurs frequently.

Two passages from the Psalms illustrate biblical writers' familiarity with the mythical sequence of creation following a battle between the storm god and the sea:

You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.
You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
You cut openings for springs and torrents;
you dried up ever-flowing streams.
Yours is the day, yours also the night;
you established the luminaries and the sun.
You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;
you made summer and winter. (Ps. 74:13–17)

You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.
You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;
the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.
(Ps. 89:9–11)

**4. The Babylonian god Marduk, depicted on a ninth-century BCE cylinder, standing victorious on the sea dragon. In biblical tradition this dragon is called Leviathan, "the twisting serpent . . . in the sea" (Isa. 27:1).**

In the Bible, the primeval sea has several names, some of which are the same as those used in nonbiblical texts, including Deep, Sea, River, Leviathan, and the dragon or the serpent. Others, such as Rahab, occur only in the Bible. Likewise, Yahweh the god of Israel is frequently described as a storm god. Like his Canaanite counterpart and sometimes rival Baal, he is the "rider on the clouds" (Ps. 68:4), whose voice is thunder (Ps. 29:3), and who reveals himself in a storm cloud (Nah. 1:3; Job 38:1).

As this summary discussion illustrates, in describing their patron god, the Israelites used the mythical vocabulary found throughout the ancient Near East. Their familiarity with myths is also evident in the account of the Flood in Genesis 6–9.

## The Flood

The myth of a deluge caused by the gods is found in several different versions in Mesopotamian literature. These share with the biblical account of Noah and the Flood the rescue of a hero and his family in a boat built according to divinely given specifications, and the hero offering a sacrifice to the gods after the flood had subsided. An excerpt from the story of the flood in the epic of Gilgamesh provides an even closer parallel; the speaker is Utnapishtim, the hero of this Flood story, who is recounting what happened after his boat came to rest on a mountain:

> When the seventh day arrived,
> I put out and released a dove.
> The dove went; it came back,
> For no perching place was visible to it, and it turned round.
> I put out and released a swallow.
> The swallow went; it came back,
> For no perching place was visible to it, and it turned round.
> I put out, and released a raven.
> The raven went, and saw the waters receding.
> And it ate, preened, lifted its tail and did not turn round.

Then I put everything out to the four winds, and I made a sacrifice...
The gods smelt the fragrance,
The gods smelt the pleasant fragrance,
The gods like flies gathered over the sacrifice.[2]

Likewise, in Genesis, after the Flood Noah released a raven once and a dove three times, and offered a sacrifice to Yahweh, who "smelled the pleasing odor" (Gen. 8:21). These and other close correspondences make it clear that there is a connection between the biblical and nonbiblical myths—if not a direct literary dependence, then at least use of a common tradition.

## Myth and history



Many historical texts have mythical components, as do collections of laws and other genres as well. For example, in the monument commemorating his victory over Israel in the mid-ninth century BCE, the Moabite king Mesha reports how his patron god Chemosh spoke to him and acted on his behalf. Likewise, the Babylonian king Nebuchadrezzar (sometimes called Nebuchadnezzar), who destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BCE, claims to have been appointed shepherd over Babylon by the god Marduk, just as his predecessor Hammurapi had more than a thousand years earlier, at the beginning of his code of laws. Kingship, then, although from our perspective a political institution, a form of government, was, at least mythologically speaking, "lowered from heaven"—established by the gods, who themselves had chosen the king.

The same understanding is found in ancient Israel. Several kings of Israel are described as having been personally chosen by Yahweh, often through the mediation of prophets. King David was told by Yahweh, "You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you shall be ruler over Israel" (2 Sam. 5:2), and, because Yahweh's reach was eventually thought to include the whole world, using the same



language of the sixth-century BCE Persian king Cyrus, Yahweh says, "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose" (Isa. 44:28).

This use of mythological language to legitimate kingship was, one might argue cynically, a way to ensure the loyalty of those ruled: people would be less inclined to rebel against a divinely chosen ruler. Yet it also illustrates how in ancient societies the sacred and the secular were not nearly as distinct as we like to think they are in our own.

Myth and history, then, were not necessarily unrelated genres. History had a mythical dimension, and myth had a historical dimension. We can observe this in the first dozen books of the Bible. From the creation of the cosmos in Genesis 1 to the destruction of Jerusalem at the end of 2 Kings, the narrative has a continuous and often carefully calibrated chronology, moving without a break from the mythical material in the early chapters of Genesis to the stories of Israel's ancestors, and then on to the Israelites' escape from Egypt, their entry into the Promised Land, and their history there. The primary actor in this continuous narrative is Yahweh, and that gives it a mythical dimension, at least in terms of the basic meaning of myth as a narrative in which a divine being is the principal character.



Yet despite this mythical component, and despite the complex prehistory of the narrative, it also obviously has a historical component. The books of Kings meticulously trace the parallel histories of the kings of Israel and Judah from the late tenth to the sixth centuries BCE, and refer often to events on a larger stage—in Egypt, in Syria, in Mesopotamia. While aware of the political, military, economic, natural, and other forces that shaped their history, most biblical writers, like their contemporaries, also viewed that history on a higher level as the continuing interaction of their god with human beings. For the biblical historians and prophets, the successes and failures of the Israelites were

ultimately interpreted as divinely bestowed rewards or, more frequently, punishments.

## God and the gods

The biblical writers knew that most peoples worshipped gods other than Yahweh, and they frequently mention deities such as the Egyptian god Amun; the Babylonian gods Marduk (also called Bel and Nebo) and Nergal; Canaanite deities, including the grain god Dagon, the storm god Baal, the plague god Resheph, the god of death Mot, and the goddesses Asherah and Astarte, as well as the national gods Chemosh of Moab, Milcom of Ammon, and Hadad of Aram.

The Bible also reports frequently that the Israelites worshipped the same gods that their neighbors did. In Egypt, before the Exodus, they served other gods (Josh. 24:14; Ezek. 20:5–8), and they continued to do so once they entered the Promised Land. King Solomon reportedly worshipped Astarte, Milcom, and Chemosh (1 Kings 11:5–7). Biblical historians and the prophets repeatedly condemn the Israelites for their failure to worship only Yahweh. They also worshipped Baal and Astarte (Judg. 2:13), Tammuz, a dying and rising god of Mesopotamia (Ezek. 8:14), the sun (Ezek. 8:16; see also 2 Kings 23:11), and the queen of heaven (Jer. 44:17), as well as such malevolent forces as Azazel (Lev. 16:8) and Lilith (Isa. 34:14). Ancient Hebrew inscriptions also provide evidence for the worship of other gods, as do personal names such as Jerubbaal, Ishbaal, Meribbaal, and Baalyada (or Beeliada), all of which contain the divine name Baal.

But it was not only unenlightened foreigners and unfaithful Israelites who believed in other gods. Throughout the Old Testament other gods are associated with Yahweh. Like a human king, and like other ancient Near Eastern gods, Yahweh presided over a kind of royal court, with ministers and attendants. The members of this heavenly court included a large number of deities,



who were Yahweh's heavenly army or "host"—he is the "god of hosts." Among them were cherubim (sphinx-like composites) and seraphim (probably winged serpents, as in Egyptian religion); messengers, later identified as angels (the English word "angel" is derived from the Greek word *angelos,* which means "messenger"); and the heavenly bodies. Collectively, this pantheon was known as the "sons of God," and they functioned as Yahweh's council, advising him and also singing his praises. So Yahweh is the "most high," but he is not alone; rather he is the head of an assembly of gods, who are his "holy ones."

The many references to other gods as Yahweh's retinue raise the question of what the biblical writers actually believed. Did they think of Yahweh as one among many gods, even if he was the

One of the most explicit examples of mythology in the Bible is Genesis 6:1–4.

> When humans began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, then the sons of God saw how beautiful the human daughters were, and they took wives for themselves from any that they chose. Then Yahweh said, "My breath shall not remain in humans forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the human daughters, who bore children to them: these were the warriors of old, the men of renown.

As in other ancient myths, divine beings are described as marrying human women and producing a generation of heroes. No other details are given in this short passage, which must be a fragment or summary of a fuller mythical tradition.

highest of them? Or is this use of mythology more literary in nature, as when Milton in *Paradise Lost* invokes the Muse in imitation of classical epics? Or is it just an unexamined archaism, as when we say that the sun rises and sets even though we know better? When we take into account the many similarities between the descriptions of Yahweh and those of other deities in the ancient Near East, along with the many references to Israelites worshipping other gods in the Bible, it is probable that the biblical writers at least in earlier periods were not monotheists in the strictest sense—that is, they did not categorically deny the existence of other gods but regarded them as subordinate to Yahweh. Because Yahweh was "a jealous god" (Exod. 20:5), only he was to be worshipped, as the first commandment states: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:4–5).


The Old Testament

By the late biblical period a strict monotheism had developed, and these references to other gods were then not understood literally. Monotheism created its own problems, however: how to deal with the polytheism of the earlier writings, and how to explain the presence of evil and suffering in the world.