

SYMBOL, MYTH, AND THE BIBLICAL REVELATION

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IF REVELATION were a collection of eternal and necessary truths concerning God, the soul, and immortality—as some rationalists contended—the proper style of theological speech would not differ from that of philosophy. If the stuff of revelation were common historical facts—as some positivists seemed inclined to think—theology could speak the language of ordinary history. But revelation has to do with the hidden God and the ways in which He calls man into union with Himself. Its doctrine is, therefore, sacred doctrine; its history, sacred history. At every point the subject matter of theology touches on mystery. And how can mystery be expressed? Unlike historical or abstract truth, mystery cannot be described or positively defined. It can only be evoked. Religious language must contrive to point beyond itself and to summon up, in some fashion, the gracious experience of the mystery with which it deals.¹

The Bible employs a great variety of literary forms. It is a small library containing historical records, poetic effusions, theological meditations, dramatic dialogues, hortatory epistles, etc. But in practically every biblical book we find exceptionally vivid and imaginative speech. The inspired imagery of the Bible may surely be reckoned as one of the main sources of its spiritual power. The biblical images astonish our expectations, grip our attention, challenge our receptivity, haunt our memory, stir our affections, and transform our attitudes. While the Bible is not lacking in doctrine, its language suggests far more about God and His ways with man than it conveys by express concepts. From the crude anthropomorphisms of Genesis to the luxuriant visions of the Apocalypse, the Bible proves itself a treasure house of vivid and majestic symbolism.

This very wealth of symbolism, however, is sometimes considered to be a stumbling block for modern man. Some are of the opinion that the “mythopoetic” idiom of the Bible has had its day, and that the

¹ Cf. K. Rahner, “Was ist eine dogmatische Aussage?” *Schriften zur Theologie* 5 (Einsiedeln, 1952) 72–74. I. T. Ramsey has shown the inadequacy of observational language in the territory of faith; cf. his *Religious Language* (London, 1957).

educated man of the twentieth century must be given a religion in statements which he can clearly analyze and verify. Others maintain that while symbolism as such is a constant feature of religious communication, the symbols of the Bible are outmoded. The biblical imagery, emanating from a type of pastoral and patriarchal society which has vanished in most parts of the globe, is said to be beyond the grasp of modern man. Still others, more attached to what they revere as the divinely given sources, feel that the Bible has lost none of its power, provided it be properly studied and expounded. The main obstacles to Christian communication, according to these conservatives, come not from the language of Scripture but from the human philosophical categories into which the Christian message has all too often been transposed. A return to biblical language, it is contended, could spark a great revival of Christian faith and devotion.

In view of these difficult but urgent questions, considerable attention is currently focused on the question of symbol and myth in the Bible. What role does each of these actually play in the canonical writings? Are the biblical images themselves canonical—in the sense of pertaining to the substance of the revelation—or are they expendable? If they are expendable, should we try to devise new myths and symbols to take the place of those which are no longer appropriate? Or should we seek to “demythologize” the Bible by setting forth the Christian message in a language purged of mythical and symbolic elements? The following pages, without claiming to solve these thorny problems, will perhaps throw light on a proper approach to them.

THE ROLE OF SYMBOL IN THE BIBLE

It would be tedious to begin with a long investigation of the exact nature of religious symbolism.² Very briefly, we may say that a symbol is a type of sign. It is a word, gesture, picture, statue, or some other type of reality which can be made present to the senses or the imagination, and which points to a reality behind itself. But this other reality is one which cannot be precisely described or defined; it is not knowable, at least with the same richness and power, except in and through the symbol. The symbol has power to evoke more than it can clearly

² For a full treatment with extensive bibliography, see S. Wisse, *Das religiöse Symbol* (Essen, 1963). In English, valuable contributions by Tillich and others may be found in F. E. Johnson (ed.), *Religious Symbolism* (New York, 1955).

represent because it addresses itself not simply to the senses and the abstractive intelligence, but to the entire human psyche. It works on the imagination, the will, and the emotions, and thus elicits a response from the whole man. Symbols, therefore, have an existential power which is lacking to purely conventional or conceptual signs. Symbols are of vast importance not simply for cognitive purposes but also for the integration of the human personality, for the cohesion of human societies, and for the corporate life of religious groups. A religion without symbolism would be unthinkable.

Symbols may be found in the natural world, in the events of history, and in the inventions of art and literature. The Bible abounds in literary symbolism, thanks to its poetic and vivid style; but, more fundamentally, it is symbolic because it has to do with symbolic realities, especially with symbolic historical events.

The central theme of both Testaments is quite evidently the great series of mighty deeds by which God manifested His mercy, His loving power, and His enduring fidelity toward the people of His choice. These deeds may be called God's gestures in history, and like human gestures they are symbolic. The divine deed par excellence is the miracle. A miracle, according to the biblical conception, is a sign-event in which a properly attuned religious consciousness can recognize, so to speak, the handwriting of God. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the miracles are eloquent. Like Caesar's wounds, they have tongues of their own.³ They reveal, with compelling realism and vividness, what Paul calls the "philanthropy of God our Saviour" (Tit 3:5).

Quite apart from particular miracles—the true value of which has unfortunately been obscured by the opportunistic apologetics of a rationalistic age—the entire history of Israel constitutes, one may say, an immense continuing deed of God and stands as an everlasting reminder of God's justice and mercy. The individual operations of God which punctuate this history—such as the crossing of the Reed Sea, the manna in the desert, the entry into the Promised Land, and the return of the exiles from Babylon—are heavily charged with symbolic

³ Cf. the famous words of Augustine concerning the miracles of Christ: "Interrogemus ipsa miracula, quid nobis loquantur de Christo; habent enim, si intelligantur, linguam suam. Nam quia ipse Christus Verbum Dei est, etiam factum Verbi verbum nobis est" (*In evang. Joh. 24, 1* [*Corpus christianorum, series latina 36, 244*]).

overtones, magnificently brought out by the figurative and hyperbolic language of the inspired accounts. Viewed in connection with their New Testament fulfilment, these events take on a fuller and more abiding significance.

In the New Testament the Incarnate Word is the absolute, unsurpassable earthly embodiment of God, and hence the supreme religious symbol. But for Christ to be effectively a symbol for us, He must be manifested for what He is. Jesus' mighty deeds, His symbolic actions (such as the cleansing of the Temple or the Eucharistic action at the Last Supper), His total self-oblation on Calvary, and God's acceptance of that sacrifice in the Resurrection and Ascension—all these events symbolically disclose various aspects of His person and mission. In Christ and the Church the religious symbolism of the Old Testament was "recapitulated"—in the rich sense given to the term by Irenaeus—and fulfilled beyond all expectation.

If we wish to fathom the true nature of symbol, we could not do better than to ponder a central Christian reality, such as the Cross. Here, in a simple and easily imagined figure, we have a vast wealth of meaning that speaks straight to the human heart. The Cross, as Susanne Langer has pointed out, evokes a whole gamut of related significances:

Many symbols—not only words, but other forms—may be said to be "charged" with meanings. They have many symbolic and signific functions, and these functions have been integrated into a complex so that they are all apt to be sympathetically invoked with any chosen one. The cross is such a "charged" symbol: the actual instrument of Christ's death, hence a symbol of suffering; first laid on his shoulders, an actual burden, as well as an actual product of human handiwork, and on both grounds a symbol of his accepted moral burden; also an ancient symbol of the four zodiac points, with a cosmic connotation; a "natural" symbol of cross-roads (we still use it on our highways as a warning before an intersection), and therefore of decision, crisis, choice; also of *being crossed*, i.e. of frustration, adversity, fate; and finally, to the artistic eye a cross is the figure of a man. All these and many other meanings lie dormant in that simple, familiar, significant shape. No wonder that it is a magical form! It is charged with meanings, all human and emotional and vaguely cosmic, so that they have become integrated into a connotation of the whole religious drama—sin, suffering, and redemption. . . .⁴

For reasons such as these, the Cross performs in an eminent way what all symbolism tends to do: it binds up the shattered, alienated

⁴ Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass., 1942) pp. 284 f.

existence of individuals and gives meaning and direction where these previously seemed to be absent. It also serves to bring men together into solidarity with one another. Christians of all ages and nations are welded into a community by their common allegiance to the standard of the Cross.

Thus far we have been speaking of the symbolic realities which form the substance of the biblical message. If we turn now to the language of Scripture, we immediately note that it is highly figurative and frequently poetic. The sacred writers quarry their images from many sources. Sometimes they build on the natural symbolic capacities of elemental realities such as fire, water, sun, bread, wine, and the like. Other images they take over from the social institutions of Israel. Thus, they speak of God as Father, King, Judge, Shepherd, Vine-dresser, and Spouse. And all these images, once they have imbedded themselves in the literature and thinking of Israel, begin to take on a history of their own, parallel to that of the people. As Austin Farrer has observed,⁵ calamities such as the collapse of the Davidic monarchy, the destruction of the Temple, and the Babylonian captivity providentially served to purify the images, to detach them from their terrestrial moorings, and in this way to give them a higher and more universal spiritual meaning. To give but one example: it was necessary for the Davidic monarchy to be irrevocably overthrown before the term "Son of David" could be an apt designation for the kind of Messiah Jesus was to be.

The literary imagery of the Old Testament was taken up with added power in the New. Christ described His own status in terms of the Old Testament figures. The parables which He preached are replete with Old Testament reminiscences. The Johannine Gospel, the most symbolic of the four, is built about dominant images such as the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Manna, the Living Water, and the Light of the World. Such symbols, as C. H. Dodd remarks, "retire behind the realities for which they stand, and derive their significance from the background of thought in which they had already served as symbols for religious conceptions."⁶ The same is true in varying degrees of the other New Testament writings. The most highly figurative of all is, of course, the Apocalypse, which writes of heaven and things to

⁵ *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster, Eng., 1948) esp. chap. 8.

⁶ *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, Eng., 1958) p. 137.

come—that is, as Austin Farrer puts it, “of a realm which has no shape at all but that which the images give it.”⁷

The abundance of symbolism in the Bible is not a matter of whim or accident. The language of everyday prose would be incapable of mediating the loving approach of the all-holy God with comparable warmth and efficacy. The inexhaustible riches which theologians and men of prayer have been able to find in the Bible would seem to be intimately bound up with its inspired symbolism; for every symbol, by reason of its concreteness and polyvalence, defies exhaustive translation into the abstract language of doctrinal discourse.⁸

The coexistence in Scripture of symbolic realities and symbolic language poses an obvious problem for the exegete. In many instances it is most difficult to ascertain whether the biblical writers intend to report an actually symbolic event or have supplied the symbolism in order to convey some theological insight. The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, because of their peculiarly literary genre (generally classified as midrashic), are a case in point. It may eventually be agreed that some of the incidents in these narratives are not, in the modern sense, historical events; but one cannot lay it down as a general principle that symbolism in a narrative is evidence against its historical realism. On the contrary, the central mysteries of the Christian faith derive much of their symbolic value from their historical reality. The Cross, for example, is a compelling symbol of our redemption precisely because the Son of God was truly crucified. And the Resurrection is a symbol of our new life in Christ because it vividly declares what God has actually done for us. Some modern interpreters, especially outside the Catholic Church, are too ready to let the symbolism of language do service for the symbolism of actual deeds. Such an attitude is ultimately at odds with the realism of the Incarnation; it is more congenial to ancient Gnosticism than to normative Christianity.

MYTH: ITS NATURE

As a form of symbolic thought and expression, myth plays a central role in many, if not all, religions. Our consideration of Christian sym-

⁷ *A Rebirth of Images* (Westminster, Eng., 1949) p. 17.

⁸ Pius XII taught that Scripture as well as tradition “tot tantosque continet thesauros veritatis, ut numquam reapse exhauriatur” (*Humani generis* [1950]; cf. Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum* [32nd ed.; Freiburg, 1963] no. 3886).

bolism, therefore, raises inevitably the problem of Christian mythology. Can it be admitted that myth has a function in revelation, in the inspired Scriptures, in the Christian religion? These questions are large and divisive. In order to approach them fruitfully, we must form some approximate idea of what the term "myth" means or should mean in such contexts. The very meaning of the term is much disputed, and the diversity of opinion on the questions just posed is largely due to this variety of definitions.

For some writers, practically any numinous symbol may be characterized as myth. If myth is whatever points up the permanent spiritual dimension of events, thus linking them with their divine ground, it is obvious that any religion, including Christianity, must have its mythology. John Knox, working with a very wide concept of myth, says that if modern man cannot accept myth, religion is no longer a possibility.⁹

But the problem of myth is more acutely posed if one defines myth, as most do, in a narrower sense. Brevard S. Childs, in an important study,¹⁰ distinguishes among several current meanings. First, there is the view of the so-called "mythical school" of Old Testament critics (Eichhorn, Gabler, and G. L. Bauer), for whom myth is a primitive form of thinking in which unexplainable events are attributed to the direct intervention of deities. Secondly, there is the Form-Critical definition, held by the Grimm brothers, W. Wundt, and H. Gunkel, who look on myth as any story in which the active persons are gods. But neither of these two definitions is satisfactory. The first rests upon the unspoken rationalistic assumption that only a primitive mind could attribute anything to an interposition of divine power. The second definition is too exclusively literary and fails to do justice to the numinous and cultic dimensions normally associated with myth. A fanciful story told merely to entertain the imagination, even if some of its characters were deities, would not appear to deserve the name of myth.

It seems best, therefore, to arrive at our definition of myth—as

⁹ *Myth and Truth: An Essay on the Language of Faith* (Charlottesville, 1964) p. 28. For a similar view, see B. H. Throckmorton, Jr., *The New Testament and Mythology* (Philadelphia, 1959) pp. 94-105.

¹⁰ *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Naperville, 1960) pp. 13-16.

Prof. Childs proposes—by a phenomenological method, taking advantage of the findings of modern ethnology and the history of religions. John L. McKenzie, in a recently published article,¹¹ gives a very helpful synthesis, lining up some of the principal characteristics of myth, at least as found in the religious literature of the ancient Near East. Relying on studies such as this, one may list the following traits as characteristically mythical.

1) Myth is a communal possession. In most cases myths have their origin in a very distant past and are folk creations. If a modern author deliberately constructs a myth, this can only be an imitation of the ancient anonymous myths which have been handed down in tradition. And it will not really obtain currency as myth unless it is accepted by a community as a symbol and carrier of its concrete form of life. It must be, as Wellek and Warren put it, endorsed by the “consent of the faithful.”¹²

2) Like other symbols, a myth is a figurative representation of a reality which eludes precise description or definition. But in contrast to the rather sophisticated symbolism of parable and allegory, mythical symbolism involves a minimum of critical reflection. The myth-maker thinks and speaks quite naively, without any effort to determine the extent to which his story corresponds to, and falls short of, the reality to which it points.

3) Myth deals with a numinous order of reality behind the appearances of the phenomenal world. If there is an animistic stage of religious evolution, in which men divinize the objects of nature themselves, this stage deserves to be called premythical. The properly mythical phase presupposes that man has learned to make some distinction between nature and its transcendent ground.¹³ Only when this insight has been achieved does man look to the actions of the gods as offering an explanation of what is experienced in the world.

4) The numinous presence which myth discerns behind the world of phenomena is portrayed in personal terms. This does not mean that

¹¹ “Myth and the Old Testament,” in *Myths and Realities: Studies in Biblical Theology* (Milwaukee, 1963) pp. 182–200, 266–68.

¹² R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1942) p. 196; a similar point is made by J. Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹³ P. Tillich, “Mythus,” *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 4 (2nd ed., 1930) 370; J. Sløk, “Mythus,” *ibid.* 4 (3rd ed., 1960) 1264.

the god or gods are clearly recognized as being persons. Myth, being essentially vague and closely bound to imaginative thought, would be incapable of conveying a definite judgment about whether the transcendent is ultimately personal. But the forces behind the world are at least depicted as if they were persons.

In a wider sense, the concept of myth can be extended to include impersonal agencies, provided these are hypostatized. In this looser usage, one may speak of the myth of inevitable progress or the myth of democracy. But since the personal reference is lacking, we do not have myth in the strict sense. If a force such as progress is portrayed as a god or goddess, this can only be by the merest artifice.¹⁴

5) The transcendent figures of the mythical world are represented as taking part in activities on a cosmic scale, which exert a permanent causal influence on earthly happenings. Each particular myth aims to account for a whole series of recurring phenomena, such as the rhythm of the seasons, the variations of weather, the alternation of night and day. To all such events one may apply what McKenzie says of the fertility gods: "The gods of fertility are not merely symbols of natural forces; the succession of phenomena depends on the perpetual life-death cycle on a cosmic scale, and these gods make the cycle."¹⁵

6) The cosmic event is expressed in the form of a story, a drama which unfolds in a dimension of duration quite removed from time as we experience it. As Eliade says, "mythic or sacred time is qualitatively different from profane time, from the continuous and irreversible time of our profane existence. . . . The myth takes man out of his own time—his individual, chronological, 'historic' time—and projects him, symbolically at least, into the Great Time, into a paradoxical instant which cannot be measured because it does not consist of duration."¹⁶ Through cultic action the mythical events are brought to bear upon particular earthly situations.

The time dimension proper to myth is of great importance in distinguishing myth not only from static types of symbolism (such as a

¹⁴ In his polemic against Bultmann, Barth insists on the permanence of myth in the modern world—a point he proceeds to exemplify by referring to "the myth of the twentieth century, the Marxist myth, the myth of the Christian West, etc." But are these properly myths? Cf. H. W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth 2* (London, 1962) 109.

¹⁵ McKenzie, *art. cit.*, p. 190.

¹⁶ M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols* (New York, 1961) pp. 57–58.

skull or a flag) but also from legends, tales, and sacred history. Legends or sagas are imaginary divinatory amplifications of events which are located in history. Tales take place in an indefinite time, "once upon a time," but not in a distinct species of time which causally underlies the time we experience on earth. Sacred history, as we shall see, unfolds in the dimension of irreversible, earthly time, and is therefore not mythical.

7) The stories of myth are not told for their own sake. As we have already indicated, they deal with matters of intense concern to man. Thanks to mythical symbolism, as Eliade says, "man does not feel himself 'isolated' in the cosmos. . . . He 'opens out' into a world which, thanks to a symbol, proves 'familiar.'"¹⁷ This existential import gives myths their religious value and their holding power. But myths vary in the immediacy with which they are connected with the present concerns of man. This will appear from any of the standard classifications of myth by reason of their content. Following Tillich,¹⁸ we may break down myths into categories such as (a) theogonic, (b) cosmogonic and cosmological, (c) anthropological, (d) soteriological, and (e) eschatological. All these areas are capable of being treated mythically insofar as realities within them are attributed to actions of the gods described in the form of symbolic narrative.

A final question about the nature of myth may now be raised. Is it necessarily polytheistic or does the notion of myth prescind from the alternatives of polytheism and monotheism? Of itself, myth is not a doctrine but a mode of thinking and expression. It might seem, then, that a man could think mythically about one god as well as about many. But the content of myth cannot surpass the capacities of mythical representation. Since the rhythms of nature are apparently manifold and mutually opposed, myth can hardly look upon the divine ground as being other than multiple. For the same reason, this ground will be viewed as closely involved with the forces of nature, and as having some kind of successive duration, ambiguously related to time as we know it. Of itself, myth cannot criticize or rise above these limitations in its own mode of representation.

¹⁷ *Id.*, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago, 1959) p. 103.

¹⁸ *Art. cit.*, col. 366.

In summary, then, we may conclude that myth, at least in the sense in which we shall use the term, is a particular type of symbol. It is a symbolic narrative which deals with events attributed to superhuman, personalized agencies. These events, unfolding in a time above that of our experience, are conceived as having a profound influence on the typical occurrences familiar to us. Through the recital and cultic re-enactment of the myths which it accepts, a community feels itself delivered from the grip of cosmic forces and, on occasion, brought into union with the divine. Not all these elements, of course, will be equally prominent in every instance. There are borderline cases which it is hard to classify as myth or legend or simple tale. Some authors may wish to give a wider or narrower meaning to the term "myth" than ours. But the description given in the preceding paragraphs is not arbitrary; it has a solid basis in the usage of many acknowledged authorities and commends itself by its relative clarity.

THE ABIDING VALUE OF MYTH

From the Enlightenment until the twentieth century, myth was generally characterized as a primitive mode of thought, practically devoid of value as an approach to truth. This point of view is reflected in the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary: "A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena." The assumption behind all such definitions is that while primitive, prelogical men may have taken myths seriously, modern man goes to them only for entertainment or relaxation. The myth in itself says something false. If it contains a hidden grain of truth, this can and should be restated in strictly rational terms.

Modern studies in fields such as depth psychology and the history of religions have brought about a far-reaching rehabilitation of myth. It is rather commonly regarded today as a distinct mode of knowledge which can never be adequately reduced to rational discourse. Some contemporary thinkers, under the influence of a Kantian epistemology, stress chiefly the value of myth in the subjective order. Cassirer, for instance, considers that it registers states of soul which cannot be

otherwise expressed.¹⁹ For Jung, the study of myths affords new insights into the structure of the human psyche, inasmuch as myths have their source in the archetypes of the collective unconscious, and never cease to emerge from it, at least in the forms of dreams and fantasies.²⁰

A second group of modern thinkers who defend the permanent validity of myth are known as "symbolico-realists." They prefer to stress the transsubjective content revealed by mythical symbols. Eliade, for instance, has explained at length how the myths of polarity and reintegration in many religious traditions—for example the myth of androgyny—disclose the structure of the divine as *coincidentia oppositorum*, thus lending support to the whole tradition of Christian negative theology from Pseudo-Dionysius to Nicholas of Cusa.²¹ Tillich, building on the religious philosophy of Schelling, agrees that myths, as a source of knowledge, have independent value. Symbols concerning divine figures and actions, he holds, are uniquely apt for relating man to the object of his ultimate concern, which is the proper domain of religious faith.²²

While he looks on myth as an abiding religious category, which can never be simply left behind, Tillich acknowledges that in a certain sense we live in a postmythical age. Once critical thought has been applied to religious questions, mythical portrayals of the gods as involved in the flux and multiplicity of natural phenomena are seen to be inadequate. The divine is grasped as unconditionally transcendent. But in the postmythical period the myth survives, according to Tillich, as a symbol or pointer to the divine. It is no longer taken literally, but is understood to be, precisely, a myth. In being recognized as such, it is in a certain sense demythologized; it becomes what Tillich likes to call a "broken myth." Thereafter both myth and critical thinking coexist, Tillich affirms, in a state of correlation or

¹⁹ Cassirer's philosophy of myth is found in several works, most importantly in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 2: Mythical Thought* (New Haven, 1955).

²⁰ For an exposition and critique, see R. Hostie, *Du mythe à la religion: La psychologie analytique de C. G. Jung* (Bruges, 1955).

²¹ *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, 1958) pp. 416–26.

²² P. Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York, 1957) p. 49. Tillich's doctrine of myth has been fully analyzed in P. Barthel, *Interprétation du langage mythique et théologie biblique* (Leiden, 1963) pp. 152–98.

dialectical tension. Neither succeeds in completely eliminating the other.

Many authors object that a myth, once it has been "elucidated into a symbol," no longer remains a myth in the true sense of the term.²³ Others maintain that it remains a myth properly so called, for it is still accepted as an element of community tradition which in some mysterious way answers to the deeper aspects of experience.²⁴ Tillich's term "broken myth" seems to combine what is valid in both these approaches. While the application of critical thinking represents a real advance over the merely mythical mode of conception, it does not fully displace the latter. Even for modern Western man, Greek myths such as those of Prometheus, Oedipus, and Sisyphus, although clearly distinguished from historical events, have not lost their psychic power. They continue to speak to the depths of our existence and help to reintegrate us with ourselves and our universe. If this be true even of pagan myths, we must consider seriously whether there cannot be such a thing as Judeo-Christian mythology.

The very term will seem shocking to those who look upon religion exclusively as revelation, and upon revelation as a collection of dogmas set forth in strict propositional language. But if religion is a dialogue between man and God, and if revelation is the whole process by which God draws near to man and manifests His presence, one must keep open, at least provisionally, the possibility that the divine presence might be apprehended and registered in mythical thought and expression. Without prejudice to the dogmatic content of revelation, which is certainly not mythical in the sense described above, it seems possible to hold that the doctrines are sometimes surrounded by a penumbra of thinking and speech which deserves to be called mythical. If myth is ever a bearer of revelation, we should expect to find that this is true in the Holy Scriptures.

MYTH IN THE BIBLE: A PRIORI CONSIDERATIONS

Catholics and conservative Protestants have often expressed the view that myth can have no place in revelation or in the Bible. Billot,

²³ So, for example, G. Miegge in *Gospel and Myth in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (London, 1960) pp. 118-19.

²⁴ J. Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

for instance, wrote that since myth is a product of popular credulity or is invented by the learned to foster popular credulity, God could not inspire such a thing.²⁵ Benoit, in the French edition of his *La prophétie* (1947), after observing that it is not for us to decide antecedently what literary forms are or are not worthy of God, adds in a footnote: "There is nevertheless one type which must a priori be excluded from the Bible as unworthy of God: this is 'myth'—for it introduces error and fiction into the very essence of religious speculations about the divinity."²⁶

As a partial explanation for these negative judgments, it may be pointed out that these authors and the Church documents to which they appeal²⁷ presuppose the "rationalistic" notion of myth which was popularized by the "mythical school" already mentioned. But it is also doubtless true that Catholic authors until very recently took it too much for granted that revelation occurred through objective historical events whose meaning was determinately given, prior to any intervention of the human mind. If we hold that God made Himself known not simply through historical happenings "which impinge from above upon Israel and to which she subsequently adds subjective reflection," but rather through "the total experience of Israel," the question of myth presents itself in an entirely new light.²⁸ Like other

²⁵ L. Billot, S.J., *De inspiratione sacrae Scripturae* (4th ed.; Rome, 1929) p. 155.

²⁶ "Il y a toutefois un genre qu'on doit exclure a priori de la Bible comme 'indigne' de Dieu: c'est le 'mythe,' parce qu'il introduit l'erreur et la fiction dans l'essence même des spéculations religieuses sur la Divinité" (in P. Synave, O.P., and P. Benoit, O.P., *La prophétie: Somme théologique, 2a-2ae, qq. 171-78* [Tournai, 1947] p. 369, n. 1). But note that in the English translation (*Prophecy and Inspiration* [New York, 1961]), made with some additions and corrections by the author, this is modified to read (p. 161): ". . . any kind of 'myth' which would introduce error or fiction into the very essence of religious speculations about the Deity." Among the manualists, Vosté and Chr. Pesch, like Billot, flatly assert that myths are excluded from the inspired books. Nicolau (in *Sacrae theologiae summa* 1 [2nd ed.; Madrid, 1952] p. 1055 [Part 4, no. 188]) holds that myth as such cannot be present in the Bible, but that myths may be cited or used as literary ornaments by the biblical authors. Bea (*De Scripturae sacrae inspiratione* [2nd ed.; Rome, 1935] no. 89) says that it may not be affirmed a priori that God cannot teach men even by myth, "dummodo curet ut haec genera ut talia cognosci possint et verbis non necessario ascribatur veritas proprio sensu historica."

²⁷ *Pius IX, Syllabus* (DS 2907/1707) and Decree of the Biblical Commission of 1909 (EB [4th ed.] 325).

²⁸ The phrases quoted are from B. S. Childs (*op. cit.*, p. 102), who is criticizing certain Protestant views of *Heilsgeschichte*.

creative expressions of the Israelite spirit, myths might well serve as building blocks of the great temple which was to receive its capping stone in Christ. We believe, therefore, that myths cannot be excluded on principle from the Bible on the ground that they are "fabula religiosa falsa" (Nicolau, no. 188), but that the question should be resolved a posteriori. We should examine what is actually to be found in the biblical books, conducting this search in the light of the notion of myth we have derived from comparative religion and ethnology.

MYTH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

At first sight it would seem that myth bulks large in the Old Testament. Competent scholars are practically unanimous in recognizing in many sections of the Old Testament, especially in Genesis, reminiscences of myths which can likewise be found in Sumerian, Accadian, and Canaanite literature.²⁹ The stories of the formation of the world, the Garden of Eden, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel—to cite several well-known examples—would seem to be adaptations of primitive myths such as we find in other cultures. But once we allow the presence of *mythical elements* in the Bible, the question still remains intact: Are they still *myths* as they appear on the pages of Scripture?

From the beginning of her existence as a people, the Israelites had an overriding conception of Yahweh which cannot be written off as myth. As McKenzie says, myth when left to its own resources remains imprisoned in the order of shifting phenomena; it merely retells the story of the phenomenal world on a larger scale, and is incapable of attaining the divine in its transcendence.³⁰ Since the time of Gunkel it has been a commonplace that Israel was not favorable soil for myths, since they link the divine with nature in a way contrary to that of the Bible and are basically incapable of overcoming polytheism.³¹ As distinct from all the mythical gods, Yahweh is constantly portrayed by the Israelites as unique, free, and totally sovereign over every other power in heaven and on earth.

²⁹ For a convenient summary, cf. H. Cazelles, "Mythe et l'A.T.," *Dict. de la Bible, Supplément* 6, 246–61. Also, more briefly, T. H. Gaster in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 3, 481–87.

³⁰ *Art. cit.*, p. 291.

³¹ H. Gunkel, "Mythus und Mythologie im A.T.," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 4 (2nd ed., 1930) 381. Also G. Stählin, art. "Mythos," in G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 4, 787.

Closely linked with the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh is the fact that the Bible disavows all nature religion. Barth is fundamentally right in holding that the Bible deals from first to last with God's historical action. Not everything in the Bible is history in the modern and technical understanding of the term; much of it is rather saga, i.e., a poetic and divinatory elaboration on history.³² But saga, like history, claims to deal with unique and unrepeatable events, whereas myth does not intend to be, but merely pretends to be, history.³³ The creation account in Genesis, far from falling in the same category as the Babylonian cosmogonies, may be viewed as a polemic against them. According to Barth, it asserts precisely what myth cannot grasp, namely, the transcendent and creative act whereby God gave the universe an absolute beginning.³⁴

The central faith of Israel undoubtedly rests not upon mythological construction but upon a privileged religious experience giving the people and its religious leaders a singularly vivid knowledge of Yahweh as Lord of the universe. This insight issued in firm doctrinal affirmations, in exclusive claims, and in a demand for total commitment—responses in no way required by a myth, which can coexist quite contentedly beside its own contrary.³⁵

Since their essential faith was nourished by something quite different from myth, it is not surprising that the Israelites produced no mythology of their own. They did, however, borrow from the mythologies of the surrounding peoples, and in some cases subjected these to a process of demythologizing which is at best relatively complete. For example, in various references to the creation, we find allusions to mighty struggles between Yahweh and mysterious monsters such as Leviathan and Rahab (e.g., Ps 73/74, Ps 88/89, Is 27, Job 9, Job 20).³⁶ What have we here if not a mythical representation—not false but not fully translated into doctrinal terms—of the ceaseless conflict between Yahweh and the powers of evil? In other passages, such as the mention

³² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/1 (Edinburgh, 1938) 83.

³³ *Ibid.* 1/1 (Edinburgh, 1936) 376.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 3/1, 84–90.

³⁵ This point is well made by H. Fries, "Mythos und Offenbarung," in J. Feiner *et al.* (ed.), *Fragen der Theologie heute* (Einsiedeln, 1957) p. 39.

³⁶ J. L. McKenzie has assembled a collection of OT passages of this type in *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 11 (1950) 275–82. For his present judgment on their mythical character, see *art. cit.*, (*supra* n. 11) p. 193.

of the sexual intercourse between the sons of God and the daughters of men (Gn 6:4 ff.), the myths seem to have been only lightly retouched and to remain, as Childs points out, in partial tension with the fundamental faith of Israel.³⁷

In the later portions of the Old Testament the mythological elements are subjected to stricter control. The prophets use mythological themes with considerable detachment and deliberation to suggest the quality of events which had not been revealed to them in detail. Especially is this true of the accounts of the creation and final consummation. Dodd gives a good explanation:

These first and last things can be spoken of only in symbols. They lie, obviously, outside the order of time and space to which all factual statements refer. They are not events (as the historian knows events), but realities of a suprahistorical order. In referring to them the Biblical writers make free use of mythology.³⁸

The entire process, which leads from the earliest traditions of Genesis to the latest contributions of the postexilic prophets, may be characterized as a continual process of demythologizing.³⁹ The primitive pagan myths, which gave concrete expression to man's longing for divine deliverance from the hostile powers, are gradually answered by divine revelation. As the answer is heard and assimilated, the myths are progressively purified, broken, and sublimated. But for the fulness of the answer, we must look beyond the Old Testament.

MYTH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The question of myth in the New Testament has been the subject of lively controversy in recent years and requires some special treatment, even in so brief a survey as we are attempting. The New Testament itself uses the term "myth" in a definitely pejorative sense. On four occasions in the Pauline pastoral epistles, *mythos* is denounced as contrary to revealed truth and sound doctrine.⁴⁰ 2 Peter, moreover, vehemently declares that the Christian faith is founded on solidly

³⁷ *Op. cit.*, chap. 3.

³⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Bible Today* (paperback ed.; Cambridge, Eng., 1961) p. 112. O. Cullmann, who likewise labels the biblical descriptions of the prehistory and posthistory as myth, draws a very sharp opposition between myth and history; cf. *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia, 1950) pp. 94-96.

³⁹ H. Cazelles, *art. cit.*, col. 260-61.

⁴⁰ 1 Tim 1:4; 4:6 f.; 2 Tim 4:3 f.; Tit 1:14. The two references to myth in the OT "deuterocanonicals" are no more complimentary: Sir 20:19, Bar 3:23.

attested facts, vouched for by eyewitnesses, and is therefore totally unlike "cunningly devised myths (*mythois*)" (2 Pt 1:16). But the very fact that the New Testament writers, toward the close of the first century, are obliged to warn the faithful so insistently against following myths, and to remind them that the gospel itself is no myth, implies that there was enough similarity so that some Christians were confusing the two. If the gospel is so closely related to myth, we may well ask whether myth did not in fact gain some foothold in the New Testament.

Since the early nineteenth century, various scholars have argued that the New Testament is heavily infected with myth. To simplify a complex chapter in the history of modern theology, we may content ourselves with a brief sketch of three main "mythicizing" positions.

1) The first great movement in this direction was influenced on the one hand by the rationalistic Old Testament critics (G. L. Bauer and others), and on the other hand by the idealistic philosophy of Hegel in particular. David Friedrich Strauss, the most eminent representative of this movement, maintained that the central truth of Christianity—namely, the idea of God-manhood—initially emerged in mythical form, which was the only way in which the men of the day were capable of accepting such a lofty idea. Strauss's conception of myth, substantially taken over from the "mythical school," included every kind of intrusion of religious ideas into historical narration. Adapting Christianity to the *Zeitgeist* of the modern age, as he understood it, Strauss systematically rejected miracles and supernatural revelation.⁴¹ Some of his successors in the Hegelian school, outstripping even Strauss in their mythomania, went so far as to deny even the historical existence of Jesus.

2) Early in the twentieth century, and especially in the 1920's, the history-of-religions school gave a new account of the mythical elements in the New Testament.⁴² They maintained that great numbers of the early Christians were converts from the Hellenistic mystery religions, which consequently exerted a decisive influence upon their under-

⁴¹ Strauss's conception of myth has been studied by C. Hartlich and W. Sachs, *Der Ursprung des Mythosbegriffes in der modernen Bibelwissenschaft* (Tübingen, 1952) chap. 5, and by P. Barthel, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-42.

⁴² On the views of R. Reitzenstein and W. Bousset, see S. Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1961* (Oxford, 1964) pp. 160-65.

standing of their new faith. For many of these former pagans, the mystery god simply acquired a new name, Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus owed much to the pagan myths of gods who died and rose; the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist were Christian counterparts of what had previously been practiced in the worship of Attis, Serapis, and other deities.

3) The most recent champion of the mythical view of the New Testament is Rudolf Bultmann. In a series of writings which go back to the 1920's—and especially in a controversial article published in 1941⁴⁸—he has argued that the New Testament is thoroughly imbued with myth, notably in the three crucial areas of cosmology, eschatology, and Christology.

The cosmology, he maintains, is mythical, since the New Testament writers accept a three-decker view of the universe, in which the earthly realm is subject to constant incursions from numinous powers who inhabit the heavens above and the underworld below. The course of history is largely shaped by the incessant struggle between the spirits of light and darkness, who seek to wrest it to their own ends. In this supernatural dualism Bultmann finds traces of Iranian mythology.

As regards eschatology, the early Christians, according to Bultmann, took over the contemporary Jewish ideas concerning the coming drama of the end-time. This was to be ushered in by the advent of the Anti-christ and a season of great tribulation. Then the Messiah would appear in glory, the dead would be recalled to bodily life, the nations would be judged, and the elect admitted to the heavenly banquet.

In the realm of Christology, Bultmann finds that the figure of Jesus was heavily overlaid with Jewish mythical expectations concerning the Messiah, the Son of Man, and the Suffering Servant. Even more significantly, the Christology of Paul and John, he holds, was influenced by the Gnostic myth of the primal man (*Urmensch*), which seems to have been Iranian in origin but was widely current by that time in the Near East.

In developing his thesis, Bultmann contends that the New Testament ideas of the incarnation and virginal conception of Jesus, His

⁴⁸ "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth* (London, 1953) pp. 1-44. This essay does little more than restate, in more programmatic form, the essential content of his article in *RGV* 4 (2nd ed., 1930) 390-94, reprinted without change in the 3rd ed.: 4, 1278-82.

miracles, His bodily resurrection and ascension, are all mythical. This mythology has become a grave obstacle to the preaching of the gospel, for modern man can no longer understand or accept it. Bultmann himself proposes a fascinating existential reinterpretation of Christianity. The Church, he maintains, must summon man to decision and authentic existence. But this summons can be issued without invoking those elements of the New Testament which Bultmann, in his existential reinterpretation, discards as mythical.

To attempt any general critique of Strauss, of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, or of Bultmann would take us far beyond the scope of this essay. The only question which concerns us is whether they have shown that the New Testament is to a great extent shot through with myth.

In the first place, it may be noted that both Strauss and Bultmann use the term "myth" in a very wide sense, to include practically everything they themselves reject. For Strauss, it embraces all allegedly supernatural events, much that we should call legend, and even poetic passages. For Bultmann, every assertion that God is active in the physical world is forthwith dismissed as mythical; so also everything betraying a prescientific approach to physics, medicine, or astronomy. By bracketing under a single term such radically diverse materials, these authors have tended to confuse the discussion.

Proceeding from a carefully considered notion of myth not unlike that adopted in this paper, Heinrich Schlier has written a very helpful essay on myth in the New Testament.⁴⁴ He lists three possible sources from which such myths might conceivably have originated: (a) contemporary Jewish apocalyptic, which sometimes made use of symbolic schemata to depict the unfolding of celestial events; (b) the Gnostic myth of the primal man, the redeemed Redeemer, which may have been current in the Mediterranean world at this time; (c) the Hellenistic and Oriental mystery religions with their dying and rising gods—although these are scarcely known to us except from post-Christian sources which afford no direct evidence for the period which concerns us.

As regards the apocalyptic elements, we may concede, with Schlier,

⁴⁴ "Das N.T. und der Mythos," *Hochland* 48 (1956) 201-12. For a concurring view, see H. Fries, "Entmythologisierung und theologische Wahrheit," in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Gott in Welt* 1 (Freiburg, 1964) 366-91, esp. pp. 380-91.

that the New Testament borrows ideograms and terminology from the apocalyptic passages in Isaiah, Daniel, and other Old Testament prophets, as well as from the further development of these forms in intertestamental Jewish apocalyptic. The Synoptic Gospels, Paul, 2 Peter, and the Apocalypse freely make use of such stereotyped imagery in referring to the eschatological events which will bring time to a close. When they speak of the days when the sun will lose its brightness, when the last trumpet will be sounded, when the elect, both living and dead, will be summoned to sit at the Messianic banquet, they are surely aware of the limitations of human language in dealing with such matters. They would no doubt be hard pressed to draw a precise line between their own doctrinal affirmations and the symbolic imagery in which these are clad. But are they using myth? The doctrinal context of these passages, their reference to a determinate future, and, above all, the conscious employment of sophisticated literary forms differentiate these apocalyptic scenes from myths in the strict sense we have adopted. The mythical elements have been taken up into an expression of eschatological faith. To the extent that critical thought has not completely penetrated the primitive imagery, we may admit the existence of a certain "mythical residue" in these passages; but there are no grounds for dismissing the whole New Testament teaching concerning the end-time as myth.

The other two ostensible sources of myth are somewhat problematical. Part of the difficulty comes from our lack of knowledge as to the forms which Gnostic speculation and the Hellenistic mystery cults had assumed by the first century. It seems probable that there were myths about, not unlike those known to us from the second and third centuries. We cannot antecedently deny that such myths may have influenced the New Testament writers.

At least it is clear that the Gospel was not radically mythicized. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find a full-blown mythical tale; we find only fragments and suggestions of myth. The faith of the community is evidently built upon a particular historical person, His actual death at some moment of worldly history, and His actual resurrection, the nonoccurrence of which would reduce the Christian religion to an empty tale (cf. 1 Cor 15:14). The events and the interpretation which faith set upon them may be judged true or false, but they do not share

in the radical ambiguity of myth, which hovers in a twilight zone between truth and falsehood, between time and eternity.

Some would say that these events are historicized myth. But this term is, I think, inept. It implies that the history of salvation, as set forth in the New Testament, belongs in the same category as stories about Greek and Hindu gods. This is to confuse the deliberate affirmations of Christian faith with the hazy dreams of a far less demanding type of religion. The central message of the gospel, which concerns the supreme intervention of God into the course of human history, is far removed from myth. But the good news had to be set forth in a way that would reach the whole man, including the very depths of human consciousness. Symbolic and even mythical forms of expression could, therefore, serve as vehicles for communicating the gospel. There is no need to deny that Christian believers in the first century, or even in the twentieth, have often thought and spoken about the contents of their faith in a somewhat mythical style. Something of the tension between *logos* and *mythos* which we have already noted in the Old Testament remains in the New, even after the Logos has Himself appeared on earth.

To identify the precise passages in which mythical thinking survives is a matter of detailed exegesis which would go beyond the limits of this article. The New Testament scholar might consider, for example, whether there is not a mythical component in the Q-narrative of the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Perhaps this scene comes as close to anything in the Gospels to verifying the notion of myth proposed earlier in this article. But its collocation in the life of a historical individual, together with the heavy doctrinal and typological emphasis, prevents us from speaking, even here, of myth pure and simple.

Because of the power of myth to speak to man in the depths of his existence, it is quite intelligible that the apostles may have used mythical language in order to bring home to their hearers, and even to themselves, the full significance of the Christian kerygma. No one doubts that, in their preaching to the Jews, they exploited to the full all the Old Testament themes which seemed to fit their purpose. They applied to Jesus with sovereign liberty whatever the Old Testament had to say about the Messianic King, the Son of Man, the Son of God, or the Suffering Servant. In addressing pagans or converts from pagan-

ism, they might be expected to adopt similar techniques, explaining the gospel in terms of the religious thought characteristic of the Gentiles (cf. Acts 17:23).

It is presently controverted among New Testament scholars to what extent Paul and John were influenced by Gnosticism and the mystery religions. Without attempting to solve this disputed question, we may say that such influences should not be ruled out on a priori grounds. If the Gnostic myth of the redeemed Redeemer seemed to illustrate well the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection in its cosmic and heavenly dimensions, there is no reason to think that Paul would not have exploited it in the service of the exalted Christology which we find in Colossians and Ephesians. So too, in his efforts to bring the Hellenistic communities to appreciate the wonderful effects of baptism and the Eucharist, Paul could have consciously borrowed from the language of the mystery religions.

Christ, in the perspectives of faith, appears as an answer to the hopes and prayers of all mankind, pagans as well as Jews. If Messianic prophecy expressed the hopes and longings of Israel, myth was the vehicle in which the Gentiles set forth their deepest anxieties and presentiments. "In daring to take over the language of myth," Schlier asserts, "the New Testament shows that Jesus Christ is the end not only of the Law, but of myth besides."⁴⁵ In this connection we may recall the remark of Harnack: "In Christ the primal figure (*Urbild*) of all the myths has become history."⁴⁶

This process of restating the Christian message in language influenced by pagan myth and mystery—the first beginnings of which may be indistinctly discerned in the New Testament itself—was to be carried much further, perhaps even too far, in the following centuries. Christian art and poetry did not hesitate to depict Christ in the form of Hermes, Orpheus, and Odysseus, and to apply to Him, the true Sun of Justice, what the pagan myths had undeservedly attributed to the sun-god Helios. The reasons for such procedures are apparent from the words which Clement of Alexandria addressed to the cultured pagans of his day: "Come, I will show you the Word and the mysteries

⁴⁵ *Art. cit.*, p. 212.

⁴⁶ *Die Entstehung der christlichen Theologie und des christlichen Dogmas* (1927) p. 16; quoted by G. Miegge, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

of the Word, and I will give you understanding of them by means of images familiar to you."⁴⁷

PERMANENT VALUE OF THE BIBLICAL SYMBOLISM

The boldness with which the early Christians transposed the gospel into new patterns of thought is highly instructive. At the beginning of this essay we raised the question, to which we may return in closing, whether the traditional Christian symbolism is not obsolete. The example of the early Christians themselves suggests that the symbolism may be changed; faith can never be bound to a single set of images. The overwhelming realities of revelation are such that they can never be contained within a single set of terms. Those who wished to evangelize and catechize in the Greek-speaking world found the terminology of Judeo-Christianity provincial and unintelligible. They abandoned titles such as "Son of Man," which was almost meaningless to Gentile Christians, and treated the title "Christ" almost as if it were a proper name. Their boldness should be an encouragement to the contemporary Christian who feels that his idiom has become strange to the secular mentality of our day.

Does this mean that the biblical symbolism is outmoded? The question cannot be answered by a simple yes or no. A balanced attitude must steer clear of both archaism and modernism. Archaism would treat beginnings as if they were final; it would take the fundamentalistic position that the Church can use no terms, images, or concepts not positively authorized by the Bible; it would practically convert preaching into Bible-reading.

The modernist extreme would say that the Church is not bound to her own origins, that she can devise new ways of thinking and speaking without having to justify them by an appeal to the past.

In a balanced view, the historical experience of the people of God, as enshrined in the Old and New Testaments, is recognized as perpetually normative. Foundations are given once for all; they cannot be replaced. Christianity, as a historical revelation, must always look back to its origins and develop in continuity with them. Scripture, even in its imagery, pertains to the patrimony which God has perma-

⁴⁷ *Protrepticus* 12, 119, 1 (GCS 1, 84). H. Rahner, in his *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (London, 1963), splendidly develops this theme from patristic sources.

nently entrusted to the Church for its study, contemplation, consolation, and guidance, "that the man of God may be made perfect, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:17).

It will, of course, be objected that the symbols of the Bible are based on a very naive and archaic world picture. But are they for that reason less valid? The ancient cosmology, which pictures the divine abode as above and the underworld below, while it is scientifically obsolete, retains much of its power as symbol. The picture of a God high above us corresponds well with the Christian doctrine of His transcendence. So likewise, the simple relationships of pastoral and patriarchal life, which supply so many of the biblical images, have close counterparts in ordinary human experience. Eliade can therefore say:

We may even wonder whether the accessibility of Christianity may not be attributable in great measure to its symbolism, whether the universal Images that it takes up in its turn have not considerably facilitated the diffusion of its message. For, to the non-Christian, one question occurs first of all: how can a local history—that of the Jewish people and of the first Judaeo-Christian communities—how can this claim to have become the pattern for all divine manifestation in concrete, historical time? I believe we have pointed to the answer: this sacred history, although in the eyes of an alien observer it looks like a local history, is also an exemplary history, because it takes up and perfects these transtemporal Images.⁴⁸

It seems clear, on the other hand, that the biblical images do not furnish sufficient materials for evangelizing the increasingly secular and urban world in which we live. It is therefore urgent, as Pope John XXIII declared, to restate the Christian message in "the literary forms of modern thought." But the challenge is not new. At no time in her history has the Church been content to reproduce mechanically the symbols of the Bible. It continually forges new ciphers to convey more adequately that which, in its full reality, bursts the bonds of any human language.

Abundant examples of the incessant creativity of the Christian imagination could be found in the visual arts or in poets such as Dante and Milton. To adduce but one example, we may note how the medieval artists, relying on the bestiaries of the time, depicted Christ as a pelican, feeding its young with its own blood. The image helped to bring home to medieval man what was already implied in the biblical

⁴⁸ *Images and Symbols*, pp. 168 f.

images, which attribute our redemption to the blood of Christ, freely shed for our sake, and which represent Him as inviting us to drink of the blood of the Son of Man.

In a thriving Christianity the creation of secondary images of this sort goes on apace. At times they may even seem to overshadow the biblical imagery, somewhat as in New Testament times the symbol of the heavenly Lord assumed priority over the older symbol of the Son of Man. But the new images, devised for the needs of a particular culture, are never completely new. They look back to the great ideas and symbols in Scripture. Like new doctrines, they are ultimately controlled by the primary sources from which they stem.

There is no need to minimize the problem of bridging the cultural gap between biblical times and our emerging technopolitan civilization. But it would be a mistake, I suggest, to concede too quickly that the biblical images should be cast aside. If some of them are less immediately available for popular preaching, they can continue to nourish the thought of the preachers themselves. Remaining in historical and spiritual continuity with the people of God in biblical times, the Church will not wish to shelve the memory of the experiences by which God originally manifested Himself to the prophets and apostles. The biblical symbolism which enshrines these experiences will always remain a primary object of study and meditation. And it is doubtful that the faithful will ever cease to look upon God as their Father and Lord, or upon Jesus as the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God. These inspired symbols form part of the patrimony by which the minds, imaginations, and emotions of the Christian people are to be formed and educated.