Remythologization as a Hermeneutic Alternative to Demythologization: An Understanding of Jesus as Remythologizer

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Copernican Revolution, the scientific method, the Enlightenment, and the development of industry and technology, the people of the 21st century encounter the world in terms of science and critical rationality more than ever. It seems that even in the face of strong and fervent counter movements such as romanticism, post-modernism, and the various religious fundamentalisms, a rationalistic-scientific view is prevalent throughout the world, especially in the West. In the sphere of Christian theology and biblical studies, Rudolf Bultmann seemed to share this outlook in the early to mid-20th century when he offered his approach of demythologization applied to the interpretation of the New Testament. In light of Bultmann, this paper intends to critique demythologization in favor of remythologization, using various sources to assist in corroboration. As an example, it will be argued that Jesus of Nazareth was demonstrating a hermeneutic of remythologization in essentially applying the Jewish exegetical tradition of Midrash to his ministerial program. This will be elucidated through illustrating examples of this method in Jesus’ teachings contained within (and also outside of) the New Testament canon.

DEMYTHOLOGIZATION

A half century ago, Rudolf Bultmann, in his article “New Testament and Mythology,” heralded a new method for interpreting the New Testament, which sent veritable shock waves throughout the Western theological world and sparked an intricate and poignant debate that continues unto today. This controversial hermeneutical venture Bultmann terms “demythologization.” He argues that since the worldview

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Weltanschauung of the New Testament is basically and thoroughly mythological, the terminology and imagery in which the core biblical proclamation (kerygma) is conveyed is simply and utterly unintelligible to us today in the modern, scientific, post-Enlightenment world. Because we live with a worldview that is pervaded by modern science and the priority of rationality, the linguistic universe of the New Testament does not make sense and thus must be stripped of its mythology so as to reveal the kerygma, the essential teaching that lies at the text’s core. That is, as people with a modern perspective, we must distinguish the experience latent in or “behind” the mythic explanation from the explanation itself, separating the kernel from the husk, the wheat from the chaff, as it were.

Bultmann’s Idea of Kerygma

For Bultmann, the kerygma is the fundamental Gospel message set in the New Testament mythical context. It is the underlying essence of the Christ-event that Bultmann wishes to salvage when dispelling the mythological framework in the process of demythologizing. Therefore, the kerygma is the redemptive, transformative, and liberating truth embedded within the New Testament texts to be discovered in the process of reading. Indeed, it is “the true and inner meaning of these mythic representations of the truth about Jesus…” This kerygma is universal by virtue of its transcendence of any particular context since it can be experienced and gained anew as time passes and contexts change.

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2 Ibid, 1-3.
3 Ibid, 2-3.
5 Ibid, 15-16.
Simply because our context and that of the Bible are quite divergent this does not mean that we must abandon the belief that Jesus the Christ “brought something extraordinary into the world, and that he is the central figure in God’s unfolding revelation of [God]self to human beings.” Demythologization should retain the enduring Gospel message of salvific truth experienced in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ while dismissing the mythological, and thus obsolete, biblical worldview.

*Worldviews: New Testament and Modern Science*

The New Testament and modern scientific worldviews have been mentioned previously. It is important to clarify the usage of the term “worldview” so as to avoid confusion and better elucidate the role of worldviews in demythologization. When the word “worldview” is employed the attempt is usually to address issues of what people feel, the ideas they hold, and the structural beliefs that characterize their particular society or culture. Ninian Smart, an influential scholar of comparative religion, speaks of worldviews as essentially dealing with human consciousness in a certain context. Worldviews depict “the history and nature of the beliefs and symbols that form a deep part of the structure of human consciousness and society.” In this light, worldviews are illustrations of the cosmos, influenced by both the human quest for truth and meaning in our experiences. They are human systems of belief and symbol that shape the manner by which people view, understand, and make meaning of the world and their place in it. As belief and symbol structures, worldviews are fundamentally concerned with the world and the place of the individual and society therein.

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6 Smart, *Worldviews*, 86.
7 Ibid, 2.
The worldview that produced the New Testament is a kind of conglomeration or confluence of certain cultural belief systems such as Greek Platonism (and Neo-Platonism), Hebraic history and religion, and various Egyptian and Zoroastrian elements. The New Testament writers understood the world as three-tiered. Heaven is above, beyond the great dome draped over the Earth’s surface, and is where God and the heavenly beings reside. Below is Hell (the underworld called Hades or Sheol), which is the realm of torment, suffering, and demons. Ours is the meso-tier where interaction occurs between God and angels on the one hand and Satan and demons on the other. This activity affects the meso-tier through intervening in the natural course of events and the thought, will, and conduct of humans. This biblical worldview consists of a created, orderly, and layered cosmos where time and reality are linear (there is a beginning, middle, and end) rather than cyclical. This is a very rudimentary picture of the New Testament worldview that Bultmann wishes to demythologize and is significantly disparate from how we understand the world today through the influence of the Enlightenment and modern science.

The modern scientific worldview is the one prevalent today. It has originated and is adhered to mainly in Western societies but also has influence elsewhere in the world. Utilizing Smart’s examination, the modern scientific worldview can be thought of as being constituted by three facets. First, those who adhere to this outlook tend to move away from traditional religious configurations and thus have become more individualistic and secularized. Also, this worldview is characterized by a certain brand of humanism

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
that maintains the notion that humans are the source of the highest values. This humanism is understood in a rather potent and exclusive sense to mean that “there is nothing higher than the human race.”\(^\text{12}\) Lastly, this worldview is scientific. It holds that “all true knowledge about the world is ultimately to be found through science, or at least within the framework of a scientific outlook.”\(^\text{13}\) With the modern scientific worldview, science is the new guiding authority and paradigm for knowing reality.

*Demythologization an Existential Task*

On Bultmann’s view, demythologization is absolutely necessary if we wish to truly attain the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus, which is veiled in the language and worldview of the New Testament writers of the early Church. For instance, our worldview today (especially in the West but also elsewhere) generally does not allow us to conceive of human nature in the same strictly dualistic manner as the New Testament. The New Testament writers operated in and through a world perspective that understood the human as a strange dichotomy of being “which exposes him to the interference of powers outside himself.”\(^\text{14}\) This is how the apostle Paul and other ancient Near Eastern writers are able to speak of demonic possession, whereas in our time relatively few such conclusions or assertions would likely be made with any sincerity.\(^\text{15}\) To us modern/postmodern people, the human being is an essential unity. If that inner unity is experienced as torn we would normally describe and explain it as schizophrenia, dissociative disorder, bipolar disorder, or some other variant. Far from the possibility of

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 49.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.


\(^{15}\) This is, of course, with the exception of certain religious fundamentalist sectors of Western society that may afford such notions as having genuine intelligibility. But even many within this population, if pressed, would likely adhere to a perspective that is nearer to the worldview of modern science and rationality than that of the New Testament.
being influenced by exterior forces, the modern human, though dependent upon certain outside powers, is essentially independent, self-responsible, and autonomous, having a certain amount of mastery over his/her own thought, will, and conduct.\footnote{16}

Fundamentally, Bultmann’s project of demythologization is an existentialist hermeneutic, which he acknowledges as such. He affirms, “…I call de-mythologization an interpretation, an existentialist interpretation … de-mythologization is an hermeneutic method, that is, a method of interpretation, of exegesis.”\footnote{17} Appealing to the history of hermeneutics from Schleiermacher and Dilthey to Heidegger and himself, Bultmann asserts that interpretation “is always based on principles and conceptions which guide exegesis as presuppositions, although interpreters are often not aware of this fact.”\footnote{18} This idea of presuppositions coming from the interpreter’s contextual situation has been termed “preunderstanding” in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics.\footnote{19} It is the preceding understanding of one’s existence and place in the world, based on one’s worldview, which one brings to the text during the interpretive transaction. Therefore, for Bultmann, demythologization is a method of interpreting biblical texts that is influenced and shaped by one’s own pre-existing, contextual situation which speaks to and informs that very situation through the process of interpretation or exegesis.

In sum, Bultmann’s demythologization theory consists of the process of realizing that we live in a radically different socio-historical situation relative to the New

\footnote{17} Rudolf Bultmann, \textit{Jesus Christ and Mythology} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 45.
\footnote{18} Ibid, 46.
Testament, resolving that the New Testament worldview is obsolete, and then liberating the *kerygma* from the mythic language in which it is proclaimed so that the modern reader may honestly recognize and accept the biblical message.

**REMYTHOLOGIZATION RATHER THAN DEMYTHOLOGIZATION**

Though demythologization is a step in the right hermeneutical direction, it is nonetheless unsatisfactory. However, Bultmann certainly has a point; the worldview since the Copernican Revolution (late 15th – early 16th centuries), the European Enlightenment (mainly 18th century), and the Industrial Revolution (late 18th – early 19th centuries) has drastically shifted. We no longer today understand the world as humans did even 200 years ago, let alone 2,000 years ago in 1st century Palestine. In light of the burgeoning of critical and scientific reasoning, it is indeed necessary to consider whether or not myth is even applicable today. Therefore, it does seem reasonable to call for an appropriate change in the interpretation of ancient texts. However, Bultmann misunderstands the meaning of myth. Granted, the meaning of myth is surely ambiguous and maddeningly elusive, but demythologization does not take a full account of the nature and interpretation of myth.

According to Bultmann, who takes his cue from the History of Religions school of thought, for something to be “myth” it must employ “the use of imagery to express the other worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side.”\(^{20}\) This is far too narrow a definition. With Ricoeur, it is necessary to assert that what must not be ignored is the temporal, sequential nature of myth.\(^{21}\) Ricoeur explains that both the *text* and the *interpretation* of the text are narrative and


therefore myth, since they involve the process of following and comprehending the “directedness” of successive actions from a perspective or world-situation.\textsuperscript{22}

A myth always tells a story, and that story contains symbolic meaning. Myth performs a symbolic function by virtue of narration because what symbols intend to convey is already “drama.”\textsuperscript{23} No matter how deep we may attempt to dig beneath symbolism we nonetheless find a linguistic structure, for symbols can only be realized and comprehended in human thought through interpretation, which means understanding via language.\textsuperscript{24} As Ricoeur aptly states, “The symbolic manifestation as a thing is a matrix of symbolic meanings as words.”\textsuperscript{25} Therefore, the appearance of anything in human experience (of this world) is interpreted, made meaningful, and becomes symbolism as narrative, which is the essential character of myth; it is what myth is.

Through the very process of interpretation a narrative of some kind is produced. Indeed, in this sense, each of our entire lives is a story. We participate in myth every day, since we are constantly transmitting and receiving stories – myths. As narrative that speaks to our existential hopes, concerns, and experiences, myth constitutes the very fabric of our understanding or conception of the world. This analysis suggests that any person in any context holding any particular worldview is essentially participating in myth by virtue of the narrative-historical character of human existence.

In addition, by the suggestion of Tillich, Bultmann might better describe his program as “deliteralization,” since what he is really attempting to accomplish is “not

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 285.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 11.
taking the symbols as literal expressions of events in time and space.”²⁶ Because symbols cannot ever be jettisoned from human expression, there will always be interpretation in every human endeavor at making sense of our experiences. This interpretive nature of the human condition is thoroughly mythological since it is characterized, as previously stated, by a narrative structure through “emplotment”²⁷ in the process of making meaning.

Indeed, this line of reasoning would advocate that the modern scientific mind also cannot avoid or dispense with myth. Though the “hard” data itself (scientific measurement) may arguably be non-mythological, the interpretation of that data and the worldview context in which that data has been procured and understood is infused with myth. Even the observation and comprehension of scientific concepts, as well as the scientific method that produces these concepts, is an interpretive enterprise and, as such, exists in the realm of myth. This is especially applicable when speaking of the assumptions and presuppositions modern science carries when proceeding in its endeavors, which is a facet of interpretation that some of Bultmann’s critics acknowledge when analyzing his theory.²⁸

As Smart points out, “…myth is not just a matter of a symbolic way of looking at the world, it is a way of coming to an understanding of one’s own identity.”²⁹ This “coming to” is the hermeneutical process of the production of meaning, which occurs just as necessarily in the tasks and objectives of modern science as in any other human

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “The Narrative Function of Myth,” Hermeneutics, 285. Emplotment refers to the process of events unfolding in a narrative so as to form a plot framework through which the story’s action moves and is comprehended.
²⁹ Smart, Worldviews, 155.
activity. Myth is the sustenance that feeds and nourishes our sense of purpose, value, and identity. Indeed, the modern scientific worldview, like any other, is also characterized by and functions through myth, even though this has taken the form of scientific methodology. That is, it is mythological in the sense that it is a temporal-historical perspective from which human beings interpret, make meaning, and hence narrate their experience of the world. The consequence of acknowledging the modern scientific worldview as myth is largely that we will have a more self-reflective, sensitive, thorough, and, therefore, accurate understanding of today’s predominant and influential milieu as successors of the Enlightenment and scientific revolution.

Demythologization certainly has its shortcomings, but it may be replaced, or at least fulfilled, by a re-conception of what it has started. For Bultmann and his followers, myth is equivalent to the pre-modern, non-scientific understanding of the world. As such, the current modern scientific worldview that so pervades our lives is hence non-mythological; it operates contrary to myth. However, as has been elucidated, the worldview of modern science is also mythological. Today, with the prominent influence of science, we relate different myths than those of the New Testament, but this only means that the task before us is not to demythologize, but rather to remythologize. To remythologize is to reappropriate and reinterpret the experience “behind” or “embedded in” the worldview of the New Testament text and to reformulate that experience in terms of our own mythological context, our own narrative understanding of human existence grounded in our own historical situation.

The interpretive function of remythologization holds three fundamental hermeneutical principles: 1) the text, 2) the interpreters’ preunderstanding, and 3) the
shaping or enlargement of meaning by the interpreter. A subject comes to a text with
preconceptions and concerns shaped by a worldview (a matrix of experience), and the
contents of experience embedded in the text’s mythology is then enlarged or expanded by
the said interpreter upon the act of interpretation. 30 This has certainly been the traditional
assumption of philosophical hermeneutics historically up through Ricoeur, Gadamer, and
David Tracy. 31 However, the program of remythologization must go one step further and
recognize that the interpretation of texts assumes the reality of yet another process,
namely, the interpretation of events and experiences that constitute the text itself from a
particular constitutive context. As Croatto describes the situation, “…a reading of the
biblical texts is circumscribed by two existential moments, or two historical poles,
‘sandwiching’ the text between them.” 32 This helps one to appreciate not only the “in
between” quality of texts but also the reality of the two existential situations or
worldviews surrounding and conditioning any interpretation. On one hand, there is the
contextual worldview of the text’s language, and on the other hand there is our present
post-Enlightenment, scientific position of understanding. Unlike demythologization,
which only attempts to get “behind” the explanation to the experience, remythologization
expands this effort to narrating the experience in interpretation according to the present,
modern mythological context.

Remythologization does not posit the naïve proposition that we humans, in any
given socio-historical context, are able to extricate ourselves from myth. To do so would

30 See J. Severino Croatto, Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Meaning as the Production of
31 For further discussion of the history and significance of philosophical hermeneutics see Kurt Mueller-
Vollmer, ed., The Hermeneutics Reader (New York: Continuum, 1985), 1-53; and Brice R. Wachterhauser,
32 Ibid, 2.
be to betray the very narrative, historical, temporal existence we live as human beings. Demythologization falsely attempts to eradicate all myth. Nonetheless, this cannot actually occur since even our current worldview is precisely that—a view of reality which is a living, historically embedded interpretation of the world of experience, making it narration, and, as such, myth. Remythologization, rather, involves the affirmation of our mythic existence as human, renarrating the experience we encounter in the act of interpreting a text, and couching that experience or message in terms of our own worldview or our own particular myth-context. In essence, Bultmann’s demythologization is equivalent to mythical elimination, while remythologization seeks mythical translation.³³

Now that the hermeneutic of remythologization has been briefly expounded in favor over demythologization, it is necessary to further elucidate the program through an illustrative example. To do so, let us examine the method of remythologization as it was practiced and lived by Jesus of Nazareth in 1st century Palestine.

JESUS’ REMYTHOLOGIZATION AS MIDRASH

Midrash and Remythologization

The exegetical methodology termed Midrash can be traced back to the return of the Israelite people from their exile in Babylon by permission of the more favorable rule of the Persians (c.a. 539 BCE with the rein of Cyrus).³⁴ Since the context in which the Torah was written was much different, and because there were so many variations of the Israelite religion due to external cultural influence, the religious authorities felt a need for

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ongoing adaptation and explication so that the observance of the Torah or Law could be ensured. There developed two basic types of midrashic literature, the *halakhic* and *aggadic Midrashim*. While the former is elucidation of the Torah in legal terms, the latter is concerned with homiletic or narrative commentary, both being quite central to the persistence of the Israelite faith. With the second fall of the Temple in 70 CE the *Midrashim* in the form of Talmudic commentary began to be transferred into writing, whereas previously the transmission was strictly oral. Ever since these developments, the Israelite-Jewish tradition has been producing a vast and rich written and oral reinterpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Thus, in the extensive history of Jewish life and literature there has developed a need for commentary and reinterpretation of traditional texts in light of the ever-changing present situations. That is, as time passes through generations and the Jewish religious communities encounter novel social and cultural challenges, the Torah is regarded as being in need of new explanations in order to meet the demands of the present circumstances of living human beings.

*Midrash*, therefore, is the hermeneutical act of rereading and expanding a text in the form of a new narrative that updates the existential meaning. As Croatto fittingly states, “There are a great number of midrashim. But besides being a literary genre, *Midrash* is a hermeneutic method…used to explain the deeper meaning of a biblical

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37 This is, of course, in addition to the Mishnah and the Talmud (of Babylon and Jerusalem). See Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 47.
text.” In this sense, *Midrash* performs the function of recontextualizing an already existing text so as to enlarge and enhance its significance in and for the currently existing situational context. Through this process an innovative narrative reproduction of myth occurs. Accordingly, *Midrash* might be viewed as a particular Jewish version or application of the method of remythologization. Indeed, the central idea in both is that *old myth* becomes recreated as *new myth* for the purpose of engendering fresh meaning in the present worldview.

**Remythologization as Midrash**

In late ancient Palestine, Jesus of Nazareth demonstrated his deep roots in the tradition and myth of his Israelite ancestors from an early age. Eventually, around the age of 30, he encountered a divine revelatory experience, having been baptized by John in the Jordan River, after which he began the most extensive and important part of his itinerant teaching. In fact, prior to his own ministry, Jesus was likely a part of the Baptist’s program, or at least sympathetic with it, a message calling for the repentance of sins and the living of a lifestyle in anticipation of the imminent rule of God. However, Jesus emerged from his encounter with John and the 40 days in the desert with his own vision and ministry, which was both immersed in and yet quite distinct from John and the former Israelite tradition. That is, rather than waiting on a strictly and exclusively future

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38 Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 49.
39 Lk. 2.41-52.
41 Mt. 4.12-25; Mk. 1.14-20; Lk. 4.14-37.
rule of God, Jesus began to proclaim that it is necessary to enter into one that is very much present in and among human beings.\textsuperscript{42}

As will be expounded, Jesus’ reformulations of the Messiah concept as well as the gospel of the Kingdom of God and the role of the Temple are \textit{Midrashim} on the established Israelite religion are essentially efforts of remythologization. That is to say, understanding \textit{Midrash} as the rhetorical underpinnings of Jesus’ teaching, it is therefore feasible to conceive of this ministry as a type of remythologization. In order to corroborate this premise, a few illustrations within the life of Jesus’ ministry will be developed.

\textit{Messiah}

Jesus’ \textit{Midrash} on the established Israelite belief in the Messiah (“the anointed one”) is not completely disparate from the traditional conception. Messianic hopes had been varied, some expecting an expressly militant person, very human in appearance, while others anticipated a more peaceful, transcendent figure from the heavenly realm.\textsuperscript{43} Regardless, as Kraybill points out,

\begin{quote}
There were many stripes of hope. But the deepest yearning was for a new ruler anointed by God – one who would reestablish the Davidic throne in all its former glory and usher in a peaceable kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

Implicitly announcing himself as the coming Messiah in quoting Isaiah 61.1-2 at his hometown synagogue, Jesus basically concurs with the popular conception of the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{42} For example, Lk. 9.27, 11.20; Mt. 10.23. Though Jesus also spoke as if the Kingdom of God will come in the future (Lk. 10.9), it is a future that is so near, so very close, that, metaphorically speaking, one could almost reach out and touch it with one’s fingers.


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 67.
\end{footnotes}
messianic savior as bringing liberation to those captive or oppressed.\textsuperscript{45} As Chilton explains, “He claimed that he fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy of someone who would be born into Israel, anointed by the Spirit, and, therefore, able to speak on God’s behalf.”\textsuperscript{46} Though his understanding of Messiah is aligned with certain strands of tradition that held an expectation of a coming liberator of some kind, he is claiming this role for himself, which is a rather bold move in a context of turmoil and desperate expectations of liberation. Furthermore, with this heralding, Jesus is invoking the images of the Hebrew Jubilee, which decrees the emancipation of land, slaves, debts, etc. at the end of the seventh seven-year period.\textsuperscript{47}

Nonetheless, Jesus is not exactly the long-awaited Messiah of Israelite prophecy and lore. Though he comes to bring the good message of liberation, freedom, and peace, this new, “midrashed” conception of Messiah is catalyzing the outbreak of God’s reign as being characterized by extensive, all-encompassing mercy and forgiveness, which is opposed to the commonly expected punishment of the wicked on the Day of Vengeance. Jesus’ \textit{Midrash} on the conception of the Messiah as a compassionate, forbearing messenger of God on earth in application to himself is a remythologization of the previous legalistic, calculating, jurisprudent one, recontextualizing it and saving its essence of liberative transformation to fit his ministry of the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

\textsuperscript{45} Lk. 4.18-19.
The Kingdom of God

One of the most frequently addressed subjects in the narratives of Jesus’ life and teaching is his central concern of the Kingdom of God. The term \textit{basilei	extipa{a} tou qeou}: translated as “Kingdom of God” is quite misleading to readers today. Usually, “kingdom” is understood as androcentric and geographically specific, as if the term is referencing a certain physical site. Accordingly, Crossan asserts, “[W]hat we are actually talking about…is power and rule, a process much more than a place, a way of life much more than a location on earth.”48 This analysis suggests that when Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God he is conveying what existence would be like if humans were under divine rule and order.49 The concept thus has much more relevance to power and process as God’s will manifest in humans beings rather than kings, kingdoms, and geographical places as human rule perfected. The question is, if Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom of God is that of a process concerned with divine power of presence and will revealed in human relationships, how is it a \textit{Midrash} of the prior understanding of the Kingdom?

In a context of revolutions, turmoil, and general unrest, the worldview of Jesus was pervaded by messianic expectation, which traditionally is linked to the anticipation of the Day of Yahweh. This concept, found throughout the prophetic Hebrew literature, asserted a future day when God’s kingdom of “glory and majesty”50 will be manifested on earth, the unrighteous and idolatrous will be purged, judgment will ensue, and the suffering of God’s people (Israel) will ultimately be replaced by peace.51 As we have received the gospel narratives today, Jesus’ discernment of the Kingdom of God, like

48 Crossan, \textit{Jesus}, 55.
50 Is. 2.9 cf.
51 See Paula Fredriksen, \textit{From Jesus to Christ}, 2nd ed. (Yale University Press, 2000), Ch. 5.
much of the apocalyptic eschatology of his context, asserts an in-breaking of God’s presence on earth. But, the characterization of this in-breaking is where the *Midrash* or remythologization can be perceived. In order to better grasp the nature and extent of the midrashic effort in Jesus’ teaching, it is instructive to highlight and explicate a few particular gospel accounts that impart a definitive understanding of the remythologized Kingdom of God.

One famous example of Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Kingdom of God is the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5-7). These passages paint a picture of God’s rule conceived primarily, though not exclusively, as being here and now, when human beings individually and socially embody divine will. As opposed to the utterly future and punishment-oriented depictions of the Day of Yahweh, Jesus’ vision in this sermon is a more *immanent* rather than *imminent* kingdom.

Kraybill speaks of Jesus’ Kingdom of God teaching as such,

The Kingdom of God is a collectivity – a network of persons who have yielded their *hearts and relationships* to the reign of God. The Kingdom is activated when God rules in hearts *and* social relationships.

In his ministry program, Jesus reconceptualizes, indeed remythologizes, the Day of Yahweh that sought vindication, the coming of judgment on sinners, and the righting of

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52 This predominance of the present Kingdom is in reference principally to the Sermon on the Mount in the Matthean text, used here as an illustrative example of Jesus’ employment of *Midrash*. Though Jesus’ sayings and parables throughout the gospel accounts speak to both a present and future Kingdom of God, the coming Kingdom is not in the far off, distant future but rather one that is impending and “at hand” (Mk. 1.5; Mt. 3.2, 4.17). That is, when taken as a whole, Jesus’ teachings assert a Kingdom that has already begun, is in process, and thus present, but is also not yet completely manifest and thus remains future. Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom is that it is an already/not yet symbol of God’s rule manifest on earth in human affairs. See Dennis C. Duling, “The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus,” *Word & World*, Vol. II, No. 2 (Spring 1982), 117-126; Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, 39-218; and especially Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 246-280.

wrongs in favor of proclaiming the Kingdom of God that offers forgiveness of sin and the radical acceptance of the one who wrongs. Jesus forwards a *Midrash* on the traditional apocalyptic and prophetic religious heritage by instituting what Kraybill has referred to as an “upside-down” kingdom.\(^{54}\) That is, instead of presenting a typical Israelite conception of a kingdom where normal, hierarchical social logic prevails, Jesus asserts a situation where the meek will inherit the earth,\(^{55}\) those persecuted and ostracized are blessed,\(^{56}\) retaliation of evil is denounced,\(^{57}\) enemies are to be loved,\(^{58}\) daily sustenance is downplayed,\(^{59}\) the centrality of judgment is mitigated in favor of egoless/humble discernment,\(^{60}\) and ethical responsibility is extended from actions to the mind.\(^{61}\) This conception reformulates the pre-existent understanding that concentrates solely on the future eschatological kingdom of vengeance and judgment, essentially turning it on its head with a message of forgiveness and compassion and molding it to his present contextual concerns for a community of equality, justice, and love.

The reconceptualized, “upside-down” Kingdom of God is most often directed by Jesus to the “poor.” As has been briefly alluded, the inverted socio-economic norm is declared: the poor are blessed and the kingdom belongs to them.\(^{62}\) Though the Matthean writer spiritualizes the aphorism, the more practical and historical meaning would assert a reference to socio-economic class.\(^{63}\) The radical significance of this assertion surfaces when one is inclined to translate *πτωκότες* in the Sermon on the Mount as “poor.” A more

\(^{54}\) Ibid., Ch. 1.
\(^{55}\) Mt. 5.5.
\(^{56}\) Mt. 5.11-12.
\(^{57}\) Mt. 5.38-42.
\(^{58}\) Mt. 5.43-48.
\(^{59}\) Mt. 6.25-33.
\(^{60}\) Mt. 7.1-5
\(^{61}\) Mt. 5.21-30
\(^{62}\) Mt. 5.3; Lk. 6.20; Thom. 54.
socio-historically responsible translation of \( ptwco\nu \) would be “destitute,” whereas \( pe\nuh \) is better rendered as “poor.” Crossan, in a cultural anthropological analysis of these terms, argues,

\[ pe\nuh \] describes the status of a peasant family making a base subsistence living from year to year; \( ptwco\nu \) indicates the status of such a family pushed, by disease or debt, draught or death, off the land and into destitution and begging.

The poor person has just enough to survive, but the destitute one has quite literally nothing whatever. Hence, Jesus is deeming blessed the destitute, the beggars of society. As Crossan further asserts, “…the only ones who are innocent or blessed are those squeezed out deliberately as human junk from the system’s own evil operations.”

Where the powers of hegemonic oppression and ostracization are woven into the social system, it is only the destitute ones who are blameless; only the beggars are true victims and may thus have a clear conscience. At base, the Midrash here is Jesus’ biting criticism of the current social framework and operation in his proclamation of a reign of God where the destitute are deemed blessed and treated as such.

Another significant instance where Midrash can be identified in Jesus’ teaching of the Kingdom of God is contained in the pericope about the master who sends his servant out to invite guests to a dinner, but realizes that when dinner-time comes, all the people have politely excused themselves. This, of course, leaves a prepared dinner with an empty table. However, the master has the servant go out and bring in anyone he encounters off the street, which inevitably would generate a table situation where all

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65 Crossan, *Jesus*, 61.
66 Ibid, 62.
67 Mt. 22.1-13; Lk. 14.15-24; Thom. 64.
classes, races, genders, sexual orientations, etc. are dining equally together. Even today (and much more so in Jesus’ context), this scenario would likely produce, at the very least, a social tension and awkwardness in many contexts.

Events such as table fellowship demonstrate what cross-cultural anthropologists term “commensality.” Farb and Armelagos explain,

In all societies, both simple and complex, eating is the primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships…To know what, where, how, when, and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society.⁶⁸

That is, essentially how people eat at the table reflects or mimics that particular society’s rules of interactions as a microcosm. Thus, in relating this parable Jesus is advancing a pointed critique of the traditional and existent system of social discrimination and so-called “appropriate” distinctions while advocating the Kingdom of God as a new social-spiritual model characterized by an “open commensality” and communal equality.⁶⁹

The remythology or Midrash in this narrative action is the radical reconception and lived application of a nondiscriminatory egalitarianism that dispels the hierarchical, inequitable, unbalanced system, positing a social situation without the pervasive values of honor and shame extant at that time.⁷⁰ Because of this midrashic societal reconstruction, Jesus was called a drunk, a glutton, and an associate of whores and tax collectors, for he did not preach or practice a kingdom of intolerance or prejudice, but rather one of radical equality and hospitality.

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⁶⁸ Peter Farb and George Armelagos, Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 4, 211.
⁶⁹ Crossan, Jesus, 69.
The Temple and God’s Presence

Besides that of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God, Jesus also performs Midrash on the role of the Temple as it relates to God’s presence on earth. The Herodian Temple during Jesus’ time was an awe-inspiring monument, massive in size, and would have been greatly impressive to anyone in the ancient world making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Particularly for Jewish people, the Temple was the very crux of political, religious, and social life. It was the central locus of worship, ritual, law, and Scripture. It contained the great altar where the high priest performed the annual sacrifice of atonement for the forgiveness of the whole Jewish population throughout the world.

More importantly, the Temple contained the Holy of Holies, into which only the high priest entered once a year on the Day of Atonement. The Holy of Holies was considered to be the actual seat of God’s presence on earth. As Chilton explains, “[The Holy of Holies] was God’s Throne on earth, the focal point of divine energy, the link between heaven and earth, between the transient and the immortal, between creator and creation.”

Jesus’ Midrash comes in the form of what has traditionally been called the “Temple Cleansing.” This story has three independent sources that attest to this incident, which suggests that it is not likely an invention by the Gospel writers. In the Marcan account, the earliest of the Synoptics, Jesus and his disciples come to Jerusalem, enter the Temple courtyard, and Jesus begins to overturn the money-changers tables and drive

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71 The second Jerusalem Temple stood approximately 100ft long, 35ft wide, and 60 ft tall. See Kraybill, *Upside-Down Kingdom*, 57; and Fredriksen, *Jesus to Christ*, 15, 76.
72 Kraybill, *Upside-Down Kingdom*, 57.
73 Kraybill, *Upside-Down Kingdom*, 57.
74 Ibid.
76 The three independent attestations are the Gospel of Thomas 71, Mark 11.15-19, and John 2.14-17. See Crossan, *Jesus*, 130.
away those buying and selling animals.\textsuperscript{77} Jesus began to teach and was saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mk. 11.17).

There was nothing wrong or illegal with the transactions taking place in the Temple’s outer court, according to Jewish law and practice. As Crossan notes,

Nobody was stealing or defrauding or contaminating the sacred precincts. Those activities were the absolutely necessary concomitants of the fiscal basis and sacrificial purpose of the Temple.\textsuperscript{78}

Fredriksen corroborates, “Moneychanging and the sale of animals…were necessary to the normal functioning of the Temple, which was universally regarded as vitally important.”\textsuperscript{79} This context suggests that Jesus’ purpose was not necessarily specifically to protest the transactions occurring in the Temple courtyard. Rather, his intention was to perform a symbolic act of destroying the Temple through “stopping its fiscal, sacrificial, and liturgical operations.”\textsuperscript{80} Since the Temple is the physical representation of Jewish religious, political, and social oppression and hegemony for Jesus, his disruption of its business is a logical and appropriate symbolic act of its destruction. Indeed, this event serves as an expression of his radically egalitarian message and way of life.

More importantly, through the symbolic destruction of the Temple, Jesus is forwarding a \textit{Midrash} on the meaning of God’s earthly presence. Instead of existing in the largely unapproachable, inaccessible Holy of Holies, God’s presence is relocated and reoriented in the heart (or the inner life) of each individual who has grasped the import of the Kingdom of God. Kraybill aptly states this perspective of Jesus’ intention and action:

\textsuperscript{77} Mk. 11.15-16.  
\textsuperscript{78} Crossan, \textit{Jesus}, 131.  
\textsuperscript{79} Fredriksen, \textit{Jesus to Christ}, 112.  
\textsuperscript{80} Crossan, \textit{Jesus}, 131.
No longer would people worship God in the holy temple or on a sacred mountain. Now they could approach God anywhere in spirit and in truth (John 4.23). Now the Spirit would dwell in the temple of each believer. Worship would be freed from elaborate buildings and complicated ritual… “Something greater than the temple is here” (Matt. 12.6).  

Jesus’ actions turn the religious establishment’s authoritarian, legalistic, and mechanistic structure on its head, replacing it with a framework of compassion, love, and forgiveness, which is representative of his remythologized Kingdom of God.

It is likely the “Temple Cleansing” incident that got Jesus executed. Nonetheless, Jesus’ radical reinterpretation of God’s inner presence in the individual frees the believer from the religious authority and exemplifies his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, which forwards a new transformative and liberating mythology. Jesus’ program becomes a religion of the heart, the spiritual core of the tradition in which he lived.

The examples of Jesus’ life and teaching as Midrash, and thus remythologization, could be multiplied, but the pattern may be discerned from the brief exposition given here.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this essay, demythologization, remythologization, and Jesus’ life and teachings in relation to remythologization have been examined. Analyzing Bultmann’s hermeneutic, it may be said that demythologization expresses the move to interpret the New Testament texts by stripping them of the “mythological” worldview in which they were composed so as to grasp the underlying kerygma (or proclaimed

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81 Kraybill, *Upside-Down Kingdom*, 69.
82 Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 432-433.
essence). On this view, demythologization is necessary today due to the fact that we live today in a modern scientific worldview, which makes the “mythic” perspective of the New Testament unintelligible to us. This paper has argued that, at base, demythologization falls short as a viable hermeneutic due to its inadequate understanding of myth in that it ignores the temporal, narrative substance of myth and its interpretation.

Through the support of such thinkers as Ricoeur, Tillich, and Croatto, a method of remythologization has been advanced as a more accurate and responsible conception of the nature and interpretation of myth. This hermeneutic takes a full account of our narrative existence, accepting that we are both producers of and participants in myth. As such, any and every worldview, be it that of the New Testament or that of modern science, is mythological in that it is interpretive. Thus, the project becomes one of recontextualizing or reappropriating the experience “behind” or “imbedded in” the explanation of the text itself.

With the method of remythologization explicated, this essay has also forwarded an example through a few illustrative accounts within Jesus’ life and teachings, suggesting that his ministry is consistent with the traditional Jewish exegetical model of Midrash. Since Midrash reinterprets old tradition or text in and for the present context, it may be concluded that Jesus’ ministry of Midrash is a particular Hebrew application of remythologization.

Fundamentally, what is at stake here is the recognition and affirmation of the narrative-mythical essence of human existence. Humanity will never fully grasp its scientific and technological achievements until the underlying mythological character of modern science is acknowledged and assimilated into its framework. One of the deep-
rooted aspects of our being is that we tell and hear stories in an effort to make meaning, which renders every aspect of our experience essentially interpretive. Indeed, let us applaud ourselves for our rational and scientific accomplishments, yet always come back to the celebration of our existence as myth-makers.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


