

Myth and Mythology

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We all know that myths are what stupid people believe. Iron age stories, with historically implausible elements, scientifically impossible events, and outrageously unacceptable moral conclusions. This, at least, is how many people regard myths, failing to distinguish them from fairy-tales and fantasies. Aha – we might think, as a modern individual with a fine education and a magnificent head brain, myths have no effect on me whatsoever.

Here, I cannot help recalling Homer Simpson. Who drove past a billboard for Krusty's clown college, scoffed at it, and said, 'That billboard had no effect on me whatsoever.' He spent the entire day with circus music in his head, pictured everyone he met throughout the day as a clown, and in the evening enrolled for Clown college.

Myths have a habit of gnawing away at us, providing a framework for how we understand ourselves in relation to others and to the world. So this term we will look at some particular myths, mythology itself, and other closely related genres.

Of course, many people regard the Bible as mythological, though that in itself is fairly crude because the bible is massive compilation of literature of different genres, from different ages. And these scriptures themselves shed light on the function of myths as identity-forming narratives. The reading we heard from Jeremiah today, offers a fascinating glimpse into one mythological framework – the creation story.

Ever since the world was created, literally thousands, maybe even hundreds of years ago, people have assumed that the creation story was to be found at the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis chapter one. But the real creation myth in Scripture is found in the next book, the book of Exodus. The exodus story, recounts how an entire nation of enslaved people, escaped their oppressors, crossed the Red Sea, and entered the promised land. That is the real creation myth – the creation of a people, of a nation. But – over the centuries, that nation became equated with the land where they lived. So, in

Jeremiah's day – when a hostile superpower brought its war machine to the gates of Jerusalem – how did that myth work?

Those foolish invaders will never conquer us. God gave us this land! We have the Temple of the Lord. God is on our side. That – is the creation myth, the exodus myth, the God-of-liberation-is-on-our-side myth.

Jeremiah, the prophet we heard from, thought otherwise. He attacked the myths that had taken root in Israel. He was busily questioning the myth that God is on our side – and everyone, it seemed, hated him for it. He was an extremist, an extinction rebellion propagandist, a nattering naybob of negativity. But was right, but that's not the point.

Needless to say, the Babylonian armies defeated Jerusalem, destroyed its Temple, and dragged its ruling elites away into exile in Babylon. And it's while they were in exile in Babylon, that they had to process not only the destruction of their city and their temple, but the destruction of their mythology. It seemed as though the God of the exodus had been defeated. How could they worship a God of liberation, when they were captives in a foreign land? Or as Boney M put it, 'how can we sing the Lord's song, in a strange land?' They were quoting psalm number 137 as it happens, which itself is struggling to deal with loss of their creation myth. And since there were so many Jewish prophets who simply could not take it – they went around saying that God was a God of liberation, and was very soon going to restore them to Jerusalem. And this is where the reading from Jeremiah kicks in.

Don't listen to those false prophets, he says, – they are lying to you. *This is what the Lord says. Not until you have been in Babylon 70 years will I bring you back to Jerusalem. I know the plans I have for you – declares the Lord, plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope.*

This was a watershed moment in Jewish history. The experience of those generations in exile, and then the later return to Jerusalem from exile, was perhaps the most creative in Israel's entire history. It enabled them to rewrite their foundation myths, to rediscover their place in the world. In fact, it was probably in exile in Babylon, that Genesis Chapter 1 was written!

A marvelous piece of anti-imperial propaganda – but that is for another day. Jeremiah himself, having been vindicated by history, became known as one of the so-called classic prophets – even if everyone hated him in his day because he questioned the reigning mythology.

The same is no less true of Jesus' day. In the New Testament reading, Jesus – as is often the case – is having a pop at the lawyers. That is, those whose job is to maintain the status quo – guardians of the reigning mythology. The prophets, like Jesus and Jeremiah before him, will often find themselves attacking the reigning mythology. This is why lawyers represented a tradition that sought to rid the world of prophets. Not that the lawyers wandered around Jerusalem declaring 'no prophets allowed here!' Jerusalem (like all other cities and cultures) honoured its prophets – but only once those prophets lay safely and silently in their tombs.

This is a dynamic of which Jesus was well aware. *You build the tombs of the prophets, but it was your ancestors who killed them. You are witnesses. You give your approval to the deeds of your ancestors. For they killed them and you do the building!*

That same self-deluding ethical retreat into 'hindsight bias' is no less prevalent in our own day. Prophets are and have always been honoured only by future generations who are safely beyond the prophet's gaze. The Civil Rights movement in the US and the Suffragettes in the UK – if they had appeared today would be deemed radicals, extremists, probably even terrorists. Why did they make people angry? Above all, it was because they threatened precious myths. It is much easier to venerate prophets than to hear them. Because prophets undermine the myths that are precious to us.

And I wonder what those myths might be? In the next few weeks, we will have a look at one of the foundational myths of modernity. The myth of progress. On and on and on and up and up and up, the future's bright etc etc. It's extremely difficult for most members of the baby boomer generation to shake those convictions. But of course – there will also be people who don't fit the mythologies of our age.

On that topic, another might be the myth of inclusivism. The readiness with which we might give ourselves a pat on the back at just how open and welcoming we are, with our protected categories and our progress flags. But as ever, there are all too often, many who are not included in our reckoning, and not deemed sufficiently human. Too many self-styled inclusivists, blissfully unaware of their selective solidarity. And on that topic, the classic speech of the former slave Sojourner Truth is well worth a read. It was addressed to progressive women's group and entitled, 'Ain't I woman?'

Another might be the growing literature on the primacy of non-human species that may well outlive our own. The myth that our imminent annihilation as a species invites us to pay attention to the post-human world that will soon replace us, a myth that us to relativise our anthropocentric biases, and pay closer attention to the non-human world in order to discover who we really are. Though it is often the unwittingly privileged who can revel in the dystopian mythologies we face – because they have yet to experience any first-hand dystopia for themselves.

Of course, most mythologies don't have a name. Most mythologies are not explicit in our culture. But often, when you understand the myths that shape us, you can lip-synch to the spontaneity of those who unwittingly inhabit these myths.

We live in an age where many influential and safely guarded myths are crumbling. And what will replace them? The New Testament is forged in precisely such an era as this – and has a lot to say on the topic. That, is where the focus of our talks this term will be.

Intercession

God of exodus, by your grace, enable us to perpetuate the myths that bring freedom where has been none. To find our place in narratives of liberation, that reflect something of who you are.

God of liberation, we stand before you today with all who suffer because of injustice and oppression.

With those who are hungry and thirsty, whose food is stolen by war and greed and famine.

Lead your people to liberty

For those who are angry, bitter or imprisoned, because of unfairness.

Lead your people to liberty

For those who have given up hope, whose grief has no light at the end of the tunnel, who believe they have been ignored, forgotten or betrayed.

Lead your people to liberty

For democratic governments that could make such a difference, but who quietly make themselves accountable to forces that generate injustice.

Lead your people to liberty

For your church, when it is paralysed by laziness, indifference or fear.

Lead your people to liberty.

God of liberation, may the glorious light of your Gospel reach into the darkest corners of our world and our lives, and open the eyes of your people's hearts, that we – even we - might embody your compassion, your healing power, and your self-giving love.