Jewish Myths between Text and Ethnography: On Michael Fishbane’s *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*  

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The concept of myth has been discussed in Jewish studies almost since its beginning. While in those initial steps discussions about myth adhered solely to the Hebrew Bible, during the next stages of the development of Jewish studies the discussion expanded to other periods of Jewish culture, raising new questions and issues, so much so that it became almost an independent discipline. Still, when a seminal study on Jewish myths is published, one that covers three successive periods—the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic literature, and medieval Kabbalah—and opens major theoretical and historical questions for a new discussion, this is undoubtedly a scholarly event. Such a book has been written by Michael Fishbane. While the long-term impact of this important study cannot be foreseen, we should not refrain from an attempt to assess the contribution of such a central publication.

The outstanding contribution of this study is its range. Fishbane delves into three complex historical periods that, in spite of great differences, are connected to each other in overt and covert relationships. One obvious link is tradition; each period builds on the motifs, thought structures, and models of the prior generations. It is impossible to understand the mythical creativity of the Kabbalah without the mythical derashah (sermon) in the Talmud and midrash; or, in turn, the mythical thinking in rabbinic literature without the foundations built in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible is another link binding all three eras. Fishbane also looks at the sustained and evolving apperception of the one God—an image that is the basis of the mythic worldview—as well as particular themes such as the struggle of God with the primaeval creatures, and the participation of God in the nation’s sufferings.

Despite its scope, the book does not neglect the details. We could say
that here, no doubt, God is found in the details. The author did not rely for his arguments on this or that representative text but brings another text and another one, each one with detailed explication founded on the severest philological principles: the manuscripts, the language, the sources, the variants, the background. One of the truly impressive characteristics of this book is the fact that its author never surrenders to any temptation toward popularization. The book is difficult and rigorous, demanding maximum concentration and professionalism. The best example for that is appendix 2, “The Term Kivyakhol and its Uses.” In this appendix, Fishbane collects all the instances of the term from every existing source in manuscript or printed book and examines the context and place of each among the other instances of the term. He also categorizes all the instances according to their themes and forms and assesses their function and meaning in Jewish culture. This is exemplary philological research, and only very few like it have been published in recent years. In conclusion, this read is not easy going, and is not intended to be.

One of the main interests of the study is its reassessment of the concept of “the monotheistic myth.” This concept changes, in many aspects, the way we understand myths in Jewish culture, and not only in the Hebrew Bible, where Fishbane uses it the most. The general scholarly understanding of biblical myths (and in many cases of those in rabbinic literature as well) is that they are either “fragments” or “remnants” of pagan myths, or “metaphors” through which creators of Jewish myths tried to express other ideas. This sort of reading has dominated Jewish studies for decades, and I myself used this approach in my studies of biblical myths.¹ According to this paradigm, biblical myths were not living expressions of biblical religiousity but either were inserted there incidentally, as remnants of older, primitive religions, or should be grasped as rhetorical models, used as vehicles to express other religious truths. With the help of dozens of examples taken from these two formative periods of Jewish culture, biblical and rabbinic, the author attempts, and to my mind succeeds convincingly, in changing this approach. Myth did not append itself incidentally to Jewish culture, and it is not an empty rhetorical or linguistic vessel. It is instead an essential element of the monotheistic worldview, and one of the most important venues used to express its creativity and spirituality.² The monotheistic myth posits one God in the center of a

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². The great Hebrew poet Uri Zvi Greenberg (1897–1981) expressed the same idea profoundly in his poetry, already in the beginning of the twentieth century, however with the inner, emotional conviction of a “prophetical” poet.
divine drama, as the dominating force of nature and the leader of human history. Looked at in this way, the God of the Hebrew Bible or of rab\nbinic literature is not different from the gods of other cultures in the ancient Near East, as Fishbane proves here again and again. However, this deep similarity is not to suggest, as previous scholarship did, that these are borrowings from or remnants of those cultures, but that biblical myth is profoundly and genuinely creative—Israelite mythmaking at its best.

The mythical worldview of the talmudic rabbis is always confusing. Since the pioneering attempts of the great nineteenth-century folklorist Max Grünbaum to define and survey myth in rabbinic literature, there has been no serious attempt to assess rabbinic mythology until the present book.\textsuperscript{3} Scholars did not consider the mythical worldview of rabbinic literature important or central for understanding rabbinic culture. The present book must change this attitude in a seminal way. Leading the reader through dozens of closely analyzed examples from across rabbinic litera\nture, Fishbane shows us a rich and powerful mythical corpus in which the rabbis invested much thought and creativity. The outstanding characteristic of these myths is not the creation of new mythical narratives but the creation of complex and imaginative ties between myths and biblical verses. This creative utilization of biblical verses is also a technique used to “Judaize” pagan myths or to transform older myths into new narratives that express the rabbis’ revolutionary ideas.\textsuperscript{4} Such is the myth of the exile of Shekhinah and God’s participation in the suffering of his people. By creating one mythical motif, the rabbis transform God from being director of Jewish history into a participating God who is going with his people into exile and suffering hand in hand with them. In the biblical book of Lamentations there is no hint of a lament by God himself. Fishbane suggests boldly that the rabbinic myth of God’s own lament over the destruction of Jerusalem was created by the imaginative interpretation of biblical verses, and the outcome is similar to the lament of the gods of ancient Near Eastern mythologies over the destruction of their cities.

\textsuperscript{3} It is to be regretted that the present book did not make any attempt to acknowledge these pioneering studies. See Max Grünbaum, “Beiträge zur vergleichenden Mythologie aus der Hagada,” \textit{Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenland\ndischen Gesellschaft} 31 (1877): 183–359, and reprinted in his \textit{Gesamelte Aufsätze zur sprach- und Sagenkunde} (Berlin, 1901).

These insights into rabbinic mythmaking shed new light on some of the most widespread rabbinic texts and invest them with new status and meaning.

Like most rabbinic traditions, rabbinic myths do not come anonymously but in the names of tradents and with a line of transmission. Another critical novum of the book is Fishbane’s observation that the major rabbinic myths were created and recreated by few schools. This changes the perception of mythmaking in the rabbinic period from anonymous and obscure texts to a definable creative process, with background and historical context.

The last important insight I will list is methodological. Fishbane shows that mythical traditions are transmitted by nonmythical genres. As it is in the Hebrew Bible, via poetry, prophecy, historiography, wisdom literature, so it is in rabbinic literature, via the derasha (or homily). In this context, a full chapter in the book is dedicated to uncovering mythical motifs in the piyyut (liturgical poetry) of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Through its outstanding form and poetical language, the piyyut expresses much original mythical worldview and creativity. Although this observation, in principle, is not new—it was used, for example, in the study of Greek myths in epic poetry, drama, and philosophical literature—it had not previously been applied to Jewish culture.

I will leave the question of the present book’s treatment of myth in Kabbalah, and its contribution to the work of Gershom Scholem and Yehuda Liebes, to experts in this field.

The contribution of the present book to Jewish studies cannot be overstated; it is more questionable, however, what its contribution is to the study of folklore and anthropology. Let us start with the working definition of myth used here:

We shall understand the word “Myth” to refer to (sacred and authoritative) accounts of the deeds and personalities of the gods and heroes during the formative events of primordial times, or during the subsequent historical interventions or actions of these figures which are constitutive for the founding of a given culture and its rituals. (p. 11)

It is understood that a definition can never be accepted by all, especially when it relates to such a complex and disputed concept as myth. The present definition, I have no doubt, was chosen carefully and is intended to serve the texts this work deals with. For this reason, I am not going to criticize the present definition in itself, or compare it to others that folk-
lorists or anthropologists would prefer. However, I will look at the consistency of this initial, working definition throughout the book. Thus, when the author speaks of the myth of the Exodus from Egypt as it was transformed from the Hebrew Bible to tannaitic literature, he writes, “[these are] teachings which transform the biblical account of Israel’s historical redemption by God into a mythic event that includes God as well” (p. 142). And then again, when he speaks of the people’s weeping over the destruction of Jerusalem in the book of Lamentations as transformed in the midrash into God’s lament, he writes, “But just this is the mythic view that midrash makes possible, transforming Israelite Heilsgeschichte into a divine drama” (p. 154). Myth is presented here as an opposition to “sacred history.” According to this view, and different from his initial definition, myth could be considered only that which is a “divine drama,” a narrative that its protagonist is only God, not human beings. This is why I could not find, although I have looked hard throughout the book, even one myth whose protagonist is a human being. Not even the Exodus from Egypt with Moses at its center, nor even tales of Samson, David, and Goliath, or the tale of Elijah’s ascension to heaven; and of course no treatment of such figures such as Rabbi Ishmael who ascended heaven in the midrash, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi who duped the Angel of Death and entered alive into heaven, Raba bar-bar Hannah who met the mythical Dead of the Desert, or the deeds of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and his group in the Zohar. Of course, an author may decide to deal only with the figure of God in Jewish myths, but such a decision should be announced loud and clear, along with an explanation for this choice. The narrowing of myth to the domain of acts and deeds of God alone in fact omits much that is essential to Jewish mythmaking in the periods this book covers (and of course in later periods as well).

5. The dozens of definitions found in the “textbooks” used by folklorists and anthropologists are not mentioned or used here at all. See William G. Doty, Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2000).


8. Rabbi Ishmael ascends to heaven to annul the death verdict for the ten rabbis, in Midrash ele ezkerah, in Aharon (Adolph) Jellinek, ed., Bet ha-midrash (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1967); Rabbi Joshua ben Levi dupes the Angel of Death, jumps alive into the Garden of Eden, and steals the Angel of Death’s sword in bKett 77b; Raba bar bar Hanna, the talmudic traveler and tall-tales storyteller, meets in the desert the hoards of exiles from Egypt who died in the desert and did not enter Canaan (bBB 73a-74b).
The last word in the aforementioned definition is “rituals.” It is somehow odd that the concept is included in the initial working definition, since it holds almost no place in the analysis or interpretation of the dozens of texts in the book (indeed, the references to the word “ritual” in the general index are misleading). At best there, we find textual analyses of a few texts from the Bible or rabbinic literature that describe rituals (as on pp. 184–87), but without any attempt to present the place and function of these mythical texts in the context of Jewish rituals. It is a general opinion today among folklorists and anthropologists that no serious discussion of myth can be conducted without some kind of reference to ritual. After the great debate that dominated mid-twentieth-century anthropological discourse, against the myth-ritual theory, a careful and balanced approach replaced it, an attitude that recognizes the essential place of ritual in mythical praxis and sees it as a central element for understanding its meaning and function.

From my vantage in folklore, the almost total disregard for the ritual basis of myth is confusing. I am not saying here that the rituals with which these myths are affiliated are somehow out there and that the author disregards them. Rather, because the materials with which he grapples are textual, not ethnographical (they are not based on ethnographic fieldwork), the social function of these texts, in which ritual acts are central, should have been taken into account. For example, the battle of God and the sea monster in the Hebrew Bible—one of the central themes discussed in the book—is repeated again and again in different variants in the Psalms. Does this poetical repetition of the motif in the Psalms have any ritual implications? Is it possible that in public events, either in the Temple or in other sacred locations, it was part of a ritual commemorating or symbolizing the mythical battle? The interpretation of this myth could benefit much from such considerations. Or another central theme in this book, the participation of the Shekhinah in the events of the Destruction and Exile, which, as Fishbane convincingly proves, is the most important myth created by the rabbis: might we consider the possibility that the public context of the myth, at least in later generations, is the Ninth of Av? That the crying and moaning on the Ninth of Av, echoed, as it were, the voice of God himself? Again, ritualistic considerations of

the myth could add much depth to its meaning and especially to its function in life (*Sitz im Leben*).

That ritual is sidelined here is symptomatic of a more general observation: the book is text-bound to the extreme. There are almost no ethnological or anthropological, hence human, considerations. It is true, of course, that when we deal with the biblical or rabbinic periods, the vast bulk of the evidence is textual. Any ethnographic hypotheses would remain of necessity hypotheses. However, we should not forget, throughout the discussion of these texts, that human beings created them and expressed themselves through them. These are human beings who projected their fears, their tensions, their hopes, and not just textual creations and text-bound insights (as Fishbane puts it: the “priority of exegesis,” p. 108).

The author argues again and again that the myths he analyzes are part of “a living myth,” and not just a dead metaphor or a remnant from earlier, pagan times. However, it is regrettable that he does not elaborate here and explain what exactly he means by “a living myth.” Does it mean that the myth was enacted ritually in real life? Or that the storytellers and their audiences (readers, in this case), believed in them in the way suggested by Paul Veyne? Or perhaps that it was created as an answer to a disturbing question regarding real society? For example, when Fishbane claims that the myth told by R. Levi in *Genesis Rabbah* (32.2)—the copulation of the upper and the lower waters—is a “rabbinizing of a living myth” (p. 107), it makes one wonder who in the time of Rabbi Levi was still interested in such myths? What did they mean and what function in real life did they have, to enable them the definition of a living myth?

I accept Fishbane’s conclusion, although not his reasons, that these myths, especially in rabbinic literature, are not folk-creations but learned literature. These are what we might call “desk myths,” created mainly at the writing or study desk and not in “real” life. They were created in order to serve, as Fishbane proves convincingly, the text-bound worldview of the rabbis, and their brilliant exegetical insights. When I surveyed the folk literature of the rabbinic period in my book *The Hebrew Folktale*, I did not include these texts in the survey, as I did not think they could be defined as folk literature, but for different reasons. They did not fulfill the basic condition of folk narrative, being “multiple existence” (multiple variants of a given narrative), the major index proving whether a tradi-

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tion was accepted by society and became part of folklore. Most of the myths presented and analyzed in the present volume did not pass the "folk barrier"; they remained textual, learned myths on the pages of the Talmud and midrash and did not exit from there into real life to become "living myths."

However, there are myths studied in depth by Fishbane that are also exemplary folklore. Such is the ancient myth of the fertilization of the virgin land by the Ba’al—the husband or male organ—which is not an original rabbinic myth but was adopted by the rabbis using their usual exegetical techniques. Or, much more interesting, is the myth of the exile of the Shekhinah. Even if we will accept Fishbane’s suggestion that this is a learned myth as it is founded on brilliant verse homily, still it is a folk myth at its best: it is found in rabbinic and medieval sources in dozens of variants; it became an oral tradition repeated again and again by various layers of Jewish society; and it was used intensively as part of the ritual of Ninth of Av. Even if it has been proved that the source of a certain myth is “learned”—that it was created within the walls of bet ha-midrash, for example—it could still be a folk myth, because of its function in society. I want to refute here a too-often-accepted misunderstanding, which considers the source of a given narrative to be the main criterion for its characterization as “learned” or “folk.” The rabbis, either in bet ha-midrash or outside it, were part of Jewish society and not a separate species. As such, their works are neither folk nor learned (could their degree of learning be measured? What if a certain rabbi is only “half” learned, as was a man like Raba bar bar Hannah?). It is the afterlife, not the origin of a motif, that should determine its status. If a folktale or a myth was created by a rabbi and it never broke through to the real life of the community, remaining only on the pages of the Talmud or midrash, it is “learned.” However, if such a creation overcame the “folk barrier,” and society found it useful or meaningful for its life, and it told and retold it again and again in different variants—this is a folk narrative, regardless of its source.

We may use here a concept that could be termed “mythical mentality,” that is to say, the mental or psychological state of a person or society that creates myths. Freud called it in his Totem and Taboo (1913) “the omnipotence of thoughts,” in which he saw the mental state that was the foundation of religions: “Men mistook the order of their ideas for the order of nature, and hence imagined that the control which they have, or

seem to have, over their thoughts, permitted them to exercise a corresponding control over things." \(^\text{13}\) Such is the foundation of the mythical mentality, that which describes God as having hands and legs or smelling the odor of sacrifices. We can accept or reject Freud’s historical observations on the origin of religions, but it is difficult to deny that the basis of mythmaking could not have been an artificial construct or logical argumentation but that same mythical mentality that projects its creations on the external world. Another, somewhat forgotten great scholar of rabbinic literature, Isaac Heinemann, proposed the concept of “organic thinking”—a type of mentality the rabbis shared with other “primitive” cultures, which was a concrete, open, and creative worldview. \(^\text{14}\) Thus, although I agree with Fishbane that most of rabbinic myths are “learned” not folk creations, the fact that there were certain rabbinic schools that chose this particular way to express their ideas is a proof for some kind of mythical mentality existing in the basis of their religious and literary thought. Is this what Fishbane means by “living myths”?

However, it does not seem right to go into this matter only halfway, to define these texts as myths and stop there. If in the basis of rabbinic religious thinking lies some kind of “mythical mentality,” and it is impossible to think otherwise, then these mythical images like the hand of God smashing the monster of the sea, or his weeping eyes on the destruction of Jerusalem, were created inside the rabbis’ thoughts and projected afterward to God, hence a rabbinic “omnipotence of thoughts.” The way from here to full admission that the very concept of God was created in the minds and souls of human beings is not very far.

On this background, it seems, we can understand, from a different angle, the term *kivyakhol* that, as I mentioned above, is studied in this book in an exemplary fashion. With the support of the three interpretations Fishbane suggests there, it is possible to understand the term as a clear statement of rabbinic theology. Understanding the danger inherent in mythical personifications of God that they were created in their minds and thoughts (while explicating biblical verses), the rabbis felt the need to limit such imaginings to the exegetical realm and keep it from the

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14. Isaac Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-agada* (Jerusalem, 1954). On the personification of God’s attributes as emerging from organic thinking, see pp. 15–20. It should be also noted that the present book could benefit much from Heinemann’s profound and pioneering discussion of the ways rabbinic literature utilizes the biblical verses.
ontology of God himself. Or to put it differently, the rabbis, through this term kivyakhol, acknowledge an “omnipotence of thoughts” that does not apply to the very existence of God. As this conviction has to be a constant and essential presence, it is repeated again and again, as Fishbane’s study proves. I am trying to argue here that we cannot understand the mythical creativity even in a “learned” case like that of rabbinic culture without acknowledging, in full and without fear, the mythical mentality on which it is founded.

The term kivyakhol is revealing from another folkloristic perspective, and this is the tension between the monotheistic-spiritual concept of God and the pagan-concrete one. I am not trying to argue that this dichotomy is always valid, or that it could exist at all in real life. However, in its basic conceptualization, a dichotomy like this lived in the minds and feelings of those who developed a monotheistic worldview. The term kivyakhol enables the rabbis to grasp, side by side, both concepts of God: to continue holding to a purist belief in the spirituality of the one God, and to describe immediately and in the most concrete way, the body of God and his human activities. At the same time that we accept in principle a basic recognition of the forceful creativity invested in the monotheistic myth for the rabbis, still it is important to emphasize that one of the sources of its strength is a powerful tension. There is a recognition in the rabbis’ monotheistic mythmaking that the personifications it creates and uses, although they refer to the one God, emerge from a mythical mentality that cannot be but pagan. The most ostensible expression of this tension is the concept of kivyakhol, and we can see and feel it in almost every occurrence of the word.

This tension is represented in the Hebrew Bible in well-known examples that Fishbane chose not to include in his discussion:

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men were building. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be withheld from them, which they have schemed to do. Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. (Gn 11.5–7)

God descends to earth to determine whether man’s deeds might pose a threat to his dominion (why cannot the Almighty see it from above?!). When the rebellious character of the builders of the city and the tower becomes evident, the third-person-singular voice changes to the first-person plural, and a number of gods descend from the heavens for a struggle
with the recalcitrant children of men. There is something in this of a
general “declaration of war” between gods and mortals who would pur-
sue the course of rebellion. The transformations in this text from the
singular to the plural and back are a clear expression of the tension be-
tween the pagan basis of this myth—the plurality of gods and their
human characteristics—and the monotheistic tendency which the book
of Genesis tries to promote. In the second example this tension is even
bolder:

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the
earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God\textsuperscript{15} saw
that the daughters of men were fair; and they took them wives of all
whom they chose. And the Lord said, my spirit shall not forever abide
in man, for that he also is flesh: and his days shall be a hundred and
twenty years. There were Nefilim in the earth in those days; and also
after that, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and
they bore children to them; the same were mighty men of old, men of
renown. (Gn 6.1–4)\textsuperscript{16}

The birth of the giants is a challenge against divinely ordained mortality,
for the “hybrid” offspring of god and man would be immortal. These
beings are the Nefilim (i.e., the giants or the great culture heroes of an-
cient mythologies). This version of the myth emphasizes that “my spirit
shall not forever abide in man, for that he also is flesh: and his days shall
be a hundred and twenty years” (Gn 6.3). In other words, the existence
of demigods who, according to common mythological beliefs, are immor-
tal is denied.

That is how the tension between the basic pagan beliefs (the multiplica-
ty of gods, the gods’ “family” [sons of gods], the human-like feelings of
the gods such as lust for women, the birth of the giants/culture heroes)
and the basic monotheistic conception of the one and only heavenly being
is expressed here. It is impossible, to my mind, to understand in all its
depth the mythical creativity in the domain of Jewish culture in each of
the three periods this book is dealing with without the acknowledgment

\textsuperscript{15}. In almost all Jewish translations of this text, I found substitutes for the
expression “sons of God [or gods],” such as “heavenly host,” “divine beings,”
“angels,” etc. I consider such a deliberate confusion between translation and in-
terpretation, because the original biblical expression interferes with someone’s
beliefs(!), as pure chutzpah.

\textsuperscript{16}. For some of the abundant scholarship published on these myths, see Yas-
sis, The Hebrew Folktale, 463–65, n. 5.
of the continuous and powerful tension—mental, theological, and literary—between the open and concrete worldview of the pagan myths and the monotheistic demand for spiritual unity of the world and the God who governs it.

The disagreement between me and the author of this important monograph emerges mainly from a different orientation: mine is more reality bound and society oriented, his is more textually bound and intellectually oriented. However, any kind of disagreement cannot weaken the seminal achievement of this book and its contribution to any future discussion of this and related themes.