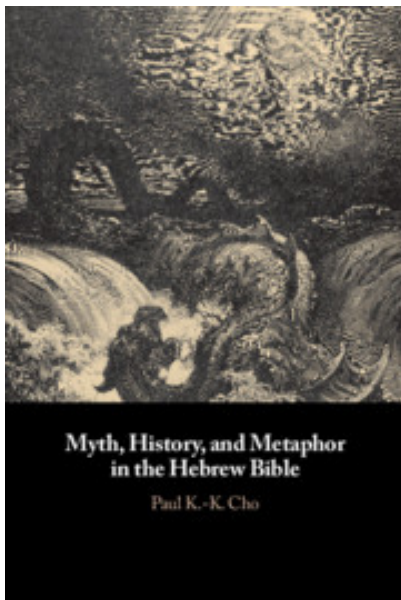


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Paul K.-K. Cho

Myth, History and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible

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Since scholars have known about the Baal Cycle and Enuma Elish, ancient Near Eastern myths of the chief deity slaying the sea deity have shaped our interpretation of biblical passages wherein YHWH opposes a sea monster (e.g., Gen 1; Exod 15; Ps 74; Job 41). Most often the Baal Cycle and Enuma Elish are read in opposition to the Hebrew Bible, with YHWH emerging out of the comparison as by far the best choice of deity the ancient world had to offer. Such case studies also demonstrate the fact that the Bible references the myths of competing religions, but only in polemic against them. Since YHWH has no beginning or end and is the only deity worthy of worship, the biblical authors have no need for mythology.

Or do they? In *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, Paul K.-K. Cho challenges these and other common assumptions about the relationship between ancient Near Eastern myth and the Hebrew Bible and looks to the sea myth as a way of understanding this relationship anew. For Cho, the sea myth is a key “structuring principle” (10) of the Hebrew Bible, one that determines its view of history from creation, through exodus and exile, to eschaton. The biblical authors’ presentation of these four events demonstrate just how ingrained into the ancient Israelite psyche the sea myth was, so much so that it generated the authors’ view of both history and the role of YHWH and Israel within it.

Cho's main argument is that "the biblical writers used the plot of the sea myth as a metaphor to depict past, present, and future events, not only in the mode of description but also more importantly in the mode of creation. Myth as metaphor ... does not only describe but also creates, in some sense, that which it describes" (12). As Cho promises, *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* contributes to our understanding not only of the reception of the sea myth but also of how myth and metaphor work together toward the literary construction of history. Using a framework drawn primarily from Aristotle's *Poetics*, with support from the work of Lakoff's and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (2003), Cho argues that the biblical authors use the verbal expression (*lexis*) and plot (*muthos*) of the sea myth to create a metaphor for historical reality in which YHWH overcomes chaotic forces, then establishes his creation, kingship, and temple. From the perspective of the biblical authors, this pattern of events happens on four occasions: the creation of the world (Gen 1; Pss 29; 74; 104), the exodus (Exod 15), the Babylonian exile (Isa 40–55), and, finally, the eschaton (Isa 24–27; Dan 7), when the pattern will repeat one last time.

Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible is divided into six core chapters, plus an introductory chapter and conclusion. In his introduction (ch. 1), Cho presents his thesis as a corrective to the notion that the Hebrew Bible is largely unaffected by the mythology of its cultural milieu. After discussing the challenges inherent to the investigation and using the example of Isa 27:1 to show how traces of myth are usually dealt with by interpreters, Cho then gives the outline of the argument. Chapter 2, "Myth as Story and Metaphor," is a theoretical discussion of myth and metaphor theory vis-à-vis Aristotle (*Poetics* and *Rhetoric*) and Ricoeur (*The Rule of Metaphor*), with little application to the biblical text. While fully acknowledging its limitations, Cho puts forth a definition of myth as "a story about weighty matters involving deities, human beings, and other personalities that, in the understanding of its adherents, reveals something true about the real order of the world" (12–13). He then discusses some of the theoretical implications of myth as both story and metaphor, including metaphor's ability to create new worlds, tying back to Cho's thesis that the Hebrew Bible uses myth to both describe and create a reality in which YHWH reigns for eternity.

Chapters 3–7 contain Cho's analysis of the Hebrew Bible in light of the ancient Near Eastern sea myth. In "The Sea Myth" (ch. 3), Cho summarizes Enuma Elish and the Baal Cycle, drawing out the four themes that are the focus of the following chapters: conflict and victory, creation, kingship, and temple. The remaining chapters present Cho's analysis of each of these four themes as they appear in Pss 29, 74, 104, and Gen 1:1–2:4a ("The Sea Myth and Creation," ch. 4); Exod 14–15 ("The Sea Myth and Exodus," ch. 5); Deutero-Isaiah ("The Sea Myth and Exile," ch. 6); and Isa 24–27 and Dan 7 ("The Sea Myth and Eschaton," ch. 7). Throughout each of these chapters, Cho stays loyal to the

four-theme framework established in chapter 2, demonstrating the presence of each of the four themes in the biblical passages that contain the sea myth. The concluding chapter, “The Sea Myth and the Hebrew Bible,” is where Cho most succinctly states his thesis that the biblical writers “interpreted all of time, from the creation to the eschaton, through the lens of the sea myth” (217). Through the enduring work of these biblical writers, this interpretation “became real, real enough to believe in and to live in, and even to die for” (223) and constitutes and invitation to embark into a world where God battles sea monsters, establishes cosmic order, and reigns continuously (227).

Cho’s thesis is firmly supported by his analyses of individual biblical texts, so much so that by the time the reader finishes chapter 5, the main argument is firmly in place; the remaining chapters serve to provide additional support and detail. The most striking feature of Cho’s work, however, is the implications of his study for understanding the lived experience of the various communities that the biblical authors reflect and engage. While Cho does not venture into a discussion of such implications, his scholarship has the potential to inspire related projects that pick up where Cho leaves off, expanding the discussion of the power of myth in texts that previous scholarship assumes are impervious to myth’s effects. *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* is important because it both opens up and moves forward a vital discussion on the impact of myth in biblical tradition, and this discussion also has wider implications for issues such as comparative method.

Relatedly, I would like Cho to say more about how he envisions the biblical authors and their audiences engaging the sea myth. To what extent did the authors and their audiences know about the different permutations of the myth? *How* did they know about the myth? What cultural institutions, rituals, or special events educated people about the myth? The reader is left with these and other such historical questions for which it would be helpful to have a brief section or, perhaps, some interwoven reflections related to the use of the sea myth in ancient Near Eastern life. Another critique is one that Cho himself mentions at several points throughout the book: because his investigation is limited to a handful of passages, the framework he provides is not without qualification when applied outside of his chosen texts (e.g., 220–21). Furthermore, no one biblical text demonstrates Cho’s thesis in its entirety, but all of the chosen texts taken together do support his thesis and thus present a particular snapshot of the effect of the sea myth on the religious imagination.

In terms of writing style, overall *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* is clear, well-structured, and succinct, accessible to humanities scholars across a range of fields. There are, however, two main interruptions to the flow of his argument. First, the chapter on theory is a challenging read, especially for those who are not well-versed in metaphor

theory, and much of its contents are not retrieved in later chapters. Second, in the process of tending to source-critical matters, Cho sometimes loses sight of his main thesis (e.g., his discussion of source critical matters related to Exod 14–15 takes up pp. 89–98, while his analysis of the sea myth within Exod 14–15 takes up pp. 99–113). Once his source-critical analyses end, however, he does return promptly to his main argument and mode of analysis.

Overall, *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* is a fruitful conversation companion for those interested in topics such as myth, metaphor theory, comparative religion, history of religion, ancient Israelite religion, and the Hebrew Bible, plus it has the potential to inspire further research resulting in additional contributions to the field.