THE MYTHICAL USE OF THE BIBLE BY EVANGELICALS

HENRY F. LAZENBY*

To speak of a mythical use of the Bible by evangelicals might sound heretical to some people. Thoughts of Zeus, Greek mythology, and Rudolf Bultmann immediately spring to mind. This is because the words "myth," "mythical," and "mythologizing" are often considered synonymous with "fairy tale," "fictional," and "storytelling."[1] From this standpoint a myth is not real but simply make-believe. As a result, when a demythologizing of the Biblical writings is attempted either by evangelicals or nonevangelicals the desire is to eliminate any hint of myths or mythologizing in the interpretation of those writings. For nonevangelicals this demythologizing is done in order to remove the supposed fictional stories from the Bible and identify those ideas or teachings that are acceptable from a modern scientific point of view.[2] For evangelicals the purpose of demythologizing is not to remove these stories but to demonstrate that they are not fictional in character but should be treated as empirical truth.

Before charges of liberalism are hurled because controversial terms are used, a clarification is necessary concerning what these words denote in the present discussion. In this paper "myth," "mythical" and "mythologizing" are terms used to describe the nonempirical reality and activity of God in an empirical context. The distinction between nonempirical and empirical is necessary to indicate the two different types of reality that are involved when one speaks of the physical world of human beings and the sacred world of God, who exists outside three-dimensional space and time limitations. Employing terms like myth, mythical, or mythologizing is the most appropriate way to recognize this distinction when interpreting Biblical texts that refer to God. As John Knox has noted:

> One might conceivably make a purely logical or metaphysical definition of the word "God" or one might affirm the bare fact of God's reality without the use of any imaginary story or picture; but one could not go beyond such abstract statements and try to say something about any action of God, or about God's relation to the world, or about his concrete meaning for us without

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*Henry Lazenby is professor of systematic theology at Oxford Graduate School in Dayton, Tennessee.

[1] See M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (New York: Harper, 1960) 23–27. For further discussion see G. Stählin, *"mythos," TDNT* 4 (1967) 762–795; D. McGaughey, "Through Myth to Imagination," *JAAR* 56/1 (Spring 1988) 51–76; W. G. Doty, *Mythography* (Birmingham: University of Alabama, 1986).

[2] See R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity* (New York: Meridian, 1956), for an example of this.

resort to mythological speech—that is, without employing images from our human experience which, by definition, cannot strictly or literally apply.[3]

When a myth is told or mythologizing is attempted, the intention is to convey how an idea, event, or individual is to be interpreted from the standpoint of God's reality or truth. As Mircea Eliade has observed:

> Myths are the most general and effective means of awakening and maintaining consciousness of another world, a beyond, whether it be the divine world or the world of the Ancestors. This "other world" represents a superhuman, "transcendent" plane, the plane of *absolute realities*. It is the experience of the sacred—that is an encounter with a transhuman reality—which gives birth to the idea that something really exists, that hence there are absolute values capable of guiding man and giving meaning to human existence. It is, then, through the experience of the sacred that the ideas of reality, truth, and significance first dawn, to be later elaborated and systematized by metaphysical speculations.[4]

Myths endeavor to disclose a meaning to an idea, event, or person that is consistent with how God may view it, or how personally significant it is to an individual in terms of experiencing God's reality or truth in an empirical context. In this connection a myth does not need to be equated with fiction. It can be considered synonymous with what is real but not necessarily empirically verifiable.

In essence, this is how terms like "spiritual" and "spiritualizing" are sometimes used by evangelicals. But these terms usually fail to establish a comprehensive framework for interpreting how God is known or experienced in an empirical context. This is the value of a term like "myth." A myth is normally part of a mythology—a mythology that supplies an integrated perspective on how to experience God or interpret God's actions in the world. As a result, the myth often becomes the means through which God is known or experienced. This knowledge or experience not only reveals something of the nature of reality but validates the present thinking of the individual about the sacred and empirical dimensions of this reality.

With these distinctions in mind, I would like to suggest that there is a legitimate mythical use of the Bible by evangelicals as well as an illegitimate use. In this paper I want to examine these two uses in order to clarify the distinction that must be maintained between finding personal significance in the reading of a Biblical text and validating that personal significance in terms of empirical evidence. In this discussion the question is not whether the Bible is inspired or inerrant but what value or worth can be placed on the personal significance that may be found in reading an inspired and inerrant text.

The goal of any interpretative effort is typically to balance the level of personal significance that is discovered in reading a Biblical text by the

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[3] J. Knox, *Myth and Truth* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1964) 5. For further discussion see H. F. Richter, "Zum Problem des Mythos," *ZRG* 40/1 (1988) 23–43; M. T. Kelsey, *Myth, History, and Faith* (New York: Paulist, 1974).

[4] M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper, 1963) 139.

degree of empirical validity that can be established for this level of signifi-
cance. While personal significance demonstrates the relevance of the pas-
sage to the needs and concerns of the individual, empirical validity is
concerned with how accurate this significance is in terms of the actual
ideas, people, stories, or events depicted in the passage. By attempting to
balance personal significance with empirical validity we propose an inter-
pretation that seeks to reproduce the original meaning of the passage.

The objective of the interpretation is to forge a common understanding
of the passage that encourages dialogue and fosters a consensus of opinion
on what the text actually means from a cultural, historical, or linguistic
point of view. The empirical validity of an interpretation, however—that is,
its accuracy and consistency with what can be known or examined by the
five senses about the ideas, stories, people, or events presented in the text—
is dependent on the available empirical evidence for discovering the original
meaning of the text. It is not concerned with how religiously significant a
text may be to a later reader but only to the original writer or readers. When
the issue is raised of what makes a text religiously significant to a later
reader, a discussion of the mythical use of the text is necessary.

In reading a Biblical passage in an effort to find a present religious
significance, as opposed to reading a passage simply to find historical in-
formation or theological concepts, there is a mythical use of the passage
whereby the reader interprets the text with his or her own context or cir-
cumstances in mind. This interpretation is a statement of personal signifi-
cance that enables the reader to assess or clarify God's involvement in his
or her own life. The interpretation that renders the text personally signifi-
cant on a religious level is mythical in nature because its truth is deter-
mined not by empirical evidence but by how it corresponds to, or is
coherent with, the immediate ideas, needs and experiences of the individ-
ual. By reading the Biblical passage in the light of these concerns, one
may develop a new understanding of God or reinforce previous ideas about
God. The interpretation that emerges from this interaction is so person-
ally interwoven with the ideas, needs and experiences of the individual
that an appeal to empirical evidence is both unnecessary and impossible.

The mythical interpretation lacks the empirical validity to make it self-
explanatory or relevant to the nonreligious person, or to someone for
whom the text is not as religiously significant. It is an interpretation by
the individual in which the ideas, people, stories, or events presented in
the Biblical texts become the means through which he or she finds some
degree of hope, love, direction, or purpose from God. In this way it does
not need outside empirical validation to be significant or meaningful. This
validation is supposedly from God to the reader through faith. It might be
pictured as "the witness of the Spirit" in some circles. It makes the inter-
pretation true to the reader but not necessarily valid for other people to
accept as true.

The distinction between validity and truth is a key in recognizing how
an interpretation can be mythically "true" to the individual but empiri-
cally "false," or at least inconclusive, to other people. Validity deals with

what is well-grounded, sound, or supportable. For example, in logic validity is concerned with the soundness of arguments. If there are valid or sound premises in the arguments, a valid conclusion is possible. Without such validity an argument is invalid or not supportable.

Truth deals with what is real or thought to be real, whether through correspondence with empirical reality or through coherence among propositions about what is real.[5] In this sense it is a statement of personal significance, whether the truth is considered religious or nonreligious. The empirical reality that the sun does not rise but that the earth moves around the sun does not nullify the personal reality that I experience when I see it rise on the horizon each morning. While empirically it is true that the sun does not rise, I experience it as rising. But it would not be valid for me to affirm that it does rise except in terms of my own experience.

A concept of rationality that allows for an experience of the sun's rising to be empirically false but existentially true must also admit that an interpretation of a Biblical text can be mythically true but empirically false. This is because a concept of rationality provides the boundaries that govern how truth is defined, how validity is established, and what degree of correspondence or coherence is necessary when speaking about the empirical world of human beings or the supernatural world of God. As a result, the balance between personal significance and empirical validity is directly related to the concept of rationality that is applied to determine both significance and validity. As Kurt Hübner has observed:

> Nothing could be further from the truth than to subsume myth under the irrational, as is so often done, and to set it in opposition to science, as that which is supposed to be somehow representative of the rational. Myth also has its rationality, a rationality which functions within the framework of its own concepts of experience and reason. . . . Myth also has its own particular type of internal systematic harmonization by means of which all phenomena are arranged within its total systematic context, a "logic" of its own "alphabet" and of its own fundamental forms or structures.[6]

What is rational is determined by what a person considers possible or probable. Since the empirical world is the most immediate and direct source for most of our knowledge, a definition of what is possible usually begins here. But the empirical world is not simply physical in the sense of air and water but also social. The definition of what is possible actually begins with what is socially acceptable for the individual to conclude about the physical world or any world that may lie beyond it. It does not end there, of course, but it does begin with this social construction of reality. For evangelicals it is also rational to conclude that the empirical and the social are not the only types of reality that exist. This is because they have experienced God on a personal level and had the truth of God's re-

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[5] See J. Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967) 114–121, 129–130 for more information. For a discussion on myth and rationality see H. H. Schmid, *Myth und Rationalitat* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1988).

[6] K. Hübner, *Critique of Scientific Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983) 244.

ality confirmed to them. God has become personally significant to them whether or not there is empirical evidence available to validate that significance.

From a religious perspective, the balancing of personal significance with empirical validity is another way of describing the difference between what can be empirically observed with the five senses and what is only experienced or known by faith. In reading a text like "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20), there is actually no evidence for an empirical crucifixion of Paul on a wooden cross. And, of course, no one interprets this verse to indicate that such an event occurred. What is described is a mythical crucifixion of Paul whereby Jesus' literal crucifixion has become so personally significant to Paul that by faith he acknowledges his own death in the light of Jesus' literal death on the cross. But even Paul's "death" is not an empirical or literal stoppage of breathing and bodily functions. It is something different from the merely physical.

It would be just as invalid to infer from this passage that Paul died physically on a cross with Jesus as it would to infer that nothing actually happened to Paul because he did not die empirically on a cross. To interpret the passage consistent with the empirical evidence of Paul's continuing existence, a distinction must be maintained between what was personally significant to Paul in the light of the literal death of Jesus and what was empirically valid to affirm about Paul when he made his statement of personal significance. By distinguishing the personally significant from the empirically valid, misinterpretation is avoided in trying to understand the text. It is not valid to affirm that Paul actually died, but it is valid to affirm that Paul found in Jesus' literal death a significance for himself that led him to identify with that death in such a way that he knew it brought an end to something in his own existence.

This distinction between significance and validity is also needed when a later reader seeks to make this verse personally relevant. But an even greater effort at mythologizing is necessary because the reader seeks to identify not only with the Pauline statement but also with the event of Jesus' literal death. Thus it is not just Paul who is interpreted as "crucified" with Christ but also the reader who finds a similar personal significance in Jesus' literal death. What this "crucifixion" means for the reader, however, will be slightly different simply because the person will use different ideas, needs and experiences in affirming why he or she found this verse of such value that it caused such an intense personal identification with the Pauline statement.

In such a case the distinction between personal significance and empirical validity is more complex to understand because there are two issues involved: the empirical death of Jesus, and the actual statement of Paul about what Jesus' death meant to him. In such a case the physical death of Jesus is only religiously significant in the light of the Pauline statement about it. For the reader this means that the decisive element in affirming personal significance is not necessarily the empirical death of Jesus but

what Paul actually said about this event. In essence the reader accepts the validity of the Pauline statement in order to discover what personal significance the statement should have for him or her.

The reader accepts that it is valid to use the Pauline statement as a basis for finding some degree of personal religious significance in the physical death of Jesus. He or she also concludes that it is valid to identify with this death in a similar way that Paul has identified with it. In such a situation the significance of Jesus' death for the reader does not hinge on on its historicity but on whether the reader accepts Paul's statement as true for whatever reason is rational to him or her. The issue of historicity is of secondary importance. The central issue is whether the reader will accept the significance of Paul's statement about the death of Jesus to such an extent that it causes the reader to find a significance in the statement that makes God seem more relevant or involved in his or her own life.

This is why a person who does not accept the historicity of Jesus' death can still find meaning in what Paul has said about it. In such a case an individual seeks to experience God or perceive something of God by understanding how Paul experienced or perceived God's relevance in his life. While Paul may have affirmed the historicity of Jesus' death as part of this experience or perception, the reader is under no obligation to make a similar affirmation. An affirmation of historicity about Jesus' death is not necessary for the significance of Paul's words to be relevant for the reader. What is essential at this point is for the reader to accept the validity of Paul's own understanding and experience about God, an understanding and experience that is based on the death of Jesus as the crucified Son of God. The validity of Paul's experience serves as the basis for affirming the validity of experiencing God in the reader's own life.

The need to understand these distinctions in balancing personal significance with empirical validity is inherent in interpreting Biblical texts like these. Most texts are not as self-explanatory as "Jesus left the synagogue and went to the home of Simon" (Luke 4:28). In this verse, unlike Gal 2:20, mythologizing is not necessary by the writer or the reader because the statement is concerned with what empirically happened. The significance of the statement lies in what is said to have happened, not whether the statement about what happened is religiously significant to the reader on a personal level. Because a Biblical text may not be as self-explanatory at times, or because a text is not religiously significant to everyone in the same way, there is a need to mythologize the text to bridge the gap between what might be personally relevant and what is depicted empirically in the text.

It is considered rational by evangelicals to affirm individually that, like Paul, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." It is rational not because they believe they are physically dead and only Christ lives empirically in their bodies but because their ideas about how the empirical and sacred worlds are related permit them to make a mythological statement like this. They are expressing what they believe is valid in an identification with Christ, an identification that involves participation in both worlds.

Their nonempirical death with Christ and the nonempirical Christ living in them is a way of expressing the significance of Christ in their empirical existence. The validity of this mythological statement is not determined by whether Jesus actually lived and died, whether Galatians is inspired by God, or even whether Paul wrote Galatians. It is determined by how personally significant Gal 2:20 is or becomes when they attempt to describe how God is directly involved in their lives. The ideas about Christ and God presented in the verse create the rationale for finding a personal significance when reading the text.

Questions of historicity, authorship, or inspiration only become important to the degree that evangelicals seek empirical support for their mythical interpretation in order to persuade nonevangelicals or other evangelicals to accept both the validity of their personal interpretation and the authenticity of their religious experience. But this is where the problem of abuse occurs in the mythical use of the Bible.

A mythical interpretation of a Biblical passage cannot be empirically validated. It can only be acknowledged in terms of what it means to the person who interprets the passage, not what it literally means from an empirical point of view. To attempt an empirical validation of a mythical interpretation is to confuse personal significance with empirical validity and make them almost synonymous. The mythical is treated as empirical and the empirical is treated as mythical. The distinction between the two is then ignored, and the sacred world is understood only in terms of the physical world. This was the same mistake by the Greeks when they fashioned their mythology.

In this type of abuse there is a mythologizing of the reader's own personal and social ideology in which God becomes encased within this frame of reference. The reader's ideology is reified in the interpretation of the text and becomes something other than a socially constructed frame of reference. The text is only significant to the degree that it validates the ideology already held sacred by the reader.

To demonstrate this type of abuse, we can compare two commentators on the phrase "I was crucified with Christ" that is presented in Gal 2:20 and that is referred to in Romans 6. For a commentator like Watchman Nee, the phrase is quite self-explanatory and should be taken literally:

> We can say, reverently but with equal accuracy, "I was crucified when Christ was crucified" or "Christ was crucified when I was crucified," for they are not two historical events, but one. My crucifixion was "with him." . . . That Christ has died is a fact, that the two thieves have died is a fact, and that you have died is a fact also.[7]

According to Nee, someone who affirms "I was crucified with Christ" has died just as empirically as Jesus and the two thieves. He makes little or no distinction between the actual deaths of Jesus and the two thieves on the one hand and the person who trusts in the significance of Jesus'

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[7] W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1963) 37.

death for sin on the other. The use of the word "fact" makes this apparent. In his interpretation of the phrase, a mythologizing occurs in which the empirical nature of the deaths is ignored and the significance of the deaths is explained by reference to the mythological character of Jesus' death. The empirical is totally absorbed by the mythical and becomes important since all the deaths are only significant from a mythical point of view. The sacred world of God is simply equated with the empirical world of human beings.

It would be irrational to affirm from an empirical viewpoint, as Nee does, that a person can be literally dead and yet physically alive. Yet it is not irrational for Nee because the empirical boundaries are thought to be of little value in affirming significance for the phrase "I am crucified with Christ." These empirical boundaries are almost illusionary and should be regarded as such by the Christian. As Nee affirms: "Every true spiritual experience means that we have discovered a certain fact in Christ, and have entered into that; anything that is not from Him in this way is an experience that is going to evaporate very soon."[8] In essence, his concept of the empirical is similar to the concept of *maya* taught by the Hindu philosopher Shankara.[9]

In turning to another commentator on this verse, we see a different interpretation given to the phrase. For William Hendriksen

> Paul is saying: As a self-righteous Pharisee, who based his hope for eternity on strict obedience to law, I, as a direct result of Christ's crucifixion, have been crucified and am no longer alive. . . . Paul has not been deprived of his life "in flesh," that is, earthly existence. It is still Paul, the individual, who thinks, exhorts, bears witness, rejoices.[10]

Hendriksen offers not a literal interpretation of the phrase but a figurative one. He believes Paul was simply using a figure of speech, which distinguishes between what was empirically true about Paul and what was figuratively true about Paul as a "self-righteous Pharisee" before God. In this way Hendriksen, by "spiritualizing" the phrase, tries to balance the personal significance that Jesus' death had for Paul as a "crucified Pharisee" with the empirical reality of Paul's continued existence as a human being.

It was empirically true that Paul was still alive in spite of an affirmation of his crucifixion with Jesus, but it was symbolically true that the Pharisaical Paul was dead through that crucifixion. For those who identify with this affirmation of Paul's, the symbolism would be true of them as well. The mythical character of this death, however, is demythologized in this interpretation. The mythological meaning of the phrase has become simply empirical in nature. It has become devoid of any mythical character and is only a figure of speech for Hendriksen.

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[8] Ibid. 58. See also pp. 42, 46, 55, 57.

[9] See N. Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (New York: Scribner's, 1969) 126–128.

[10] W. Hendriksen, *A Commentary on Galatians* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968) 105–106.

Regarding the phrase as a figure of speech, however profound, is not the same as regarding it as mythological. The figurative does not intend to present the reality of the thing described but its analogous relation to the empirical object. Whether a nonempirical reality exists is not necessarily implied in a figure of speech. The mythological, though, does make this implication. This is why the phrase, to retain its religious significance, should be interpreted as mythological and not simply as a figure of speech.

By interpreting the phrase in a mythological way a mystical element enters into the reading that moves the significance of the phrase beyond the moral and empirical to the religious and the sacred. This mystical element implies that an experience of God is involved that causes the reader to discover a personal religious significance in the empirical death of Jesus and the empirical existence of Paul. In this way God has enabled the reader to grasp a transcendent meaning and significance to the text that serves as a reference point for understanding his or her own empirical context. By reading the phrase mythologically and identifying with the words of Paul an individual has interpreted the significance of the empirical from the standpoint of the sacred.

From the standpoint of the sacred, there is something that occurs other than an empirical death or a figurative death. There is a mystical death of Paul or the reader that is just as true as Jesus' empirical death. This mystical death is not empirically verifiable but is valid within the rational framework of Paul's or the reader's ideas about God and Christ. While the mystical death cannot be explained with reference to the empirical, it does not mean that it did not occur or cannot have an impact on the empirical. In the phrase "I am crucified with Christ" there is an acknowledgment of this impact but not a definition of what it means from an empirical point of view. But this, of course, is the essence of the mystical. As Albert Schweitzer has remarked:

> Mysticism can never become dogma. But, on the other hand, dogma can never remain living without a surrounding aura of mysticism. Therefore Paul's mystical doctrine of redemption is for us a precious possession, without which we cannot form the right conception either of Christianity or of our individual state as Christians. It is truth which a man who has been taken possession of by Christ urges his brethren to verify in experience.[11]

Through a mythological reading of the text, the sacred becomes real in the empirical. It establishes the context in which God is discussed and experienced. While there will never be a complete understanding of the mystical experience that occurs in the actual reading, the myth or mythology presented in the text provides the basis to rationally think about this experience in the empirical world. This mythology is derived from what the writer has previously experienced of God's reality. In this way a continuity of experience emerges between the writer and the later readers that validates the truth of God's continuing involvement in the lives of human beings.

[11] A Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (London: A. and C. Black, 1931) 387.

In a mythological use of the Biblical text, there is a desire not to eliminate or overcome the boundaries between the sacred and the empirical but to demonstrate the relevance of the sacred for the empirical and further clarify how the empirical should be understood. The extent to which the mythological clarifies the empirical will be realized through the actual experience of the reader. For this reason mythical truth will always be a personal truth for the individual. This truth nurtures faith in what God has done, and can do, through the beliefs, ideas, or practices that have been developed in a socially constructed reality. While the truth may not be empirically verifiable to other people who have not experienced it, neither is the faith. Both depend on the reality of God to sustain their actuality in the life of the individual.

This mythical use of a Biblical text does not mean that evangelicals can ignore the responsibility to provide an interpretation of the text that coincides with the original meaning of the writer. An empirically valid interpretation is necessary if the original intentions of the writer are to be understood and placed in their historical and cultural contexts. It is also a way to determine if the reader's experience of God is consistent with what the writer has experienced of God. If there is little or no consistency, then it is logical to conclude that the reader did not experience what the writer did. In such a case the experience needs reevaluation in order to determine exactly what was experienced. Acknowledging a mythical use of the text simply points out the need to distinguish what was originally significant to the writer, whether from a religious or nonreligious point of view, from what a later reader may find religiously significant in the text for his or her own life. This distinction is rooted in the distinction between empirical validity and personal significance. Without a clear acknowledgment of that distinction, there is the danger that the Biblical texts will be abused and misapplied when they are interpreted by evangelicals.