

**“Mythological language raises very difficult if not impossible problems.” Discuss this statement by examining both verification and falsification.**

“A myth is a symbolic approximate expression of truth, which the human mind cannot perceive sharply and completely, but can only glimpse vaguely, and therefore cannot adequately or accurately express.” – Millar Burrows.

In the context of religion, myths can be taken to mean stories about God which have vital meanings for an individual, a community, a nation or the cosmos. Myths embody and express claims which cannot be expressed in any other way.

Myth is the most complex type of symbolic language because it uses symbols, metaphors and imagery. They use them to explain the unexplainable and to give insights into human existence.

Mythology does not convey information that isn't true. They convey concepts that go way beyond the true/false descriptors. They express stories that are “other worldly”. They allow humans to gain insight into two very important questions; the cosmological question about the meaning of life and the existential question about emotions, feelings, believing etc.

Mythological language was used a lot by the biblical writers. They have been included in the ideas such as creation, the fall and the flood. Within the Bible myths also attempt to explain the mystery of human origins and human nature. There have been a brave set of people over the last forty years, who have chosen to say a lot of religious statements are myths – which has challenged existing beliefs.

There are of course many examples of religious myths and there are three ways in which the word myth can be used in religious language:

- The myth could be a story which isn't true, but has some other value. Braithwaite believed that they were inspirational as they make us motivated.
- It could be a literary device. Ineffable, i.e. beyond language, unexplainable.
- A method of interpreting “ultimate reality”. They open up like symbols, they have new levels of reality or as Randal argues their purpose is to bind communities together.

Biblical stories which seem meaningless to scientists are more understandable if you think of them as another language. Myths are extremely powerful in their metaphor or symbolic meanings. If you don't take a literal view, and you consider the Bible is supposed to be recording history or science then yes, a lot of the Bible is false.

For example, can you calculate the age of the world from the Bible? Yes, if you take it literally, but that would be wrong because scientists have enough evidence to prove that the world is much older than that. What one does, if we interpret the Bible in a mythological sense, is side step the facts to make them more meaningful i.e. “the world is a few thousand years old,” could just simply be saying God made it.

So referring to the statement, “mythological language raises very difficult if not impossible problems” It is clear that even more than symbols, myths seem outdated. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, D.F. Strauss suggested that we need to shift the focus of myth from “the story of a *miraculous* occurrence, to the *story* of a miraculous occurrence.” This basically means in the first case, it is assumed that an objective true narrative about a miracle is being expressed, in the second, that an embodied religious truth is being conveyed in a story form and isn't necessarily true.

Another critic of the use of mythological language was Rudolph Bultmann who said that we must not take myths literally. The Bible should be seen as a myth and only by reading the Bible as mythological text can we fully understand it. The Bible was written in a pre-scientific age when mythological language had a lot of meaning, i.e. the three levels of Hell, Earth and Heaven.

Now that the world view has changed we have got to strip the Bible of its myths so that we can understand it again. Bultmann doesn't mean cut them out, he means re-interpret them, demythologise them. He believed that it is impractical for humanity in modern times to believe such outdated stories: "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and, at the same time, to believe in the New Testament of demons and spirits."

"The real point of a myth is not to give an objective world picture; what is expressed in it, rather is how we human beings understand ourselves with the world."

Bultmann's main example of a myth was Luke's explanation of Jesus being born in a stable. Strip away the myths and you see that it's saying God can be found in the most humble and excluded parts of the world. Also the resurrection, he suggests is showing the re-invention of the people as they become Christians.

Bultmann claims myth made it harder to grasp the Biblical truth. However, if you start doing this, then you end up saying that mythical language is meaningless, which is wrong because you shouldn't underestimate myth and its power.

However it undermines their status as true accounts and events. Yet some believers take them to be true which of course gives them meaning.

Another philosopher to agree with the statement is Richard Dawkins, who commented in 'The God Delusion', "...much of the bible is... just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors.." He could also have added that this was put together during the course of many centuries.

Significantly the difference between Bultmann and Dawkins is that Bultmann still maintained that there was truth to be extracted from the mythological narrative once the myth was stripped away.

However, those who are in support of myth, claim that, since religious language is anti-realist, it is not concerned with making true or false statements. J.W. Rogerson wrote: "Because myths have their birth not in logic but in intuitions of transcendence, they are of value to traditions that seek to describe the action of the other worldly in the present world."

So in conclusion, it is important to understand how myths should be interpreted rather than being concerned to establish what the facts of the matter actually are. We have to remember how these stories were heard, i.e. in the context of simple people. This was a language they could understand and images and pictures that related to ordinary readers and listeners to religious works. This allowed the underlying meanings to be absorbed without needing a great education.