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# The Rise of Jewish Mythology. Biblical Exegesis and the Scientific Study of Myth

Carlotta Santini

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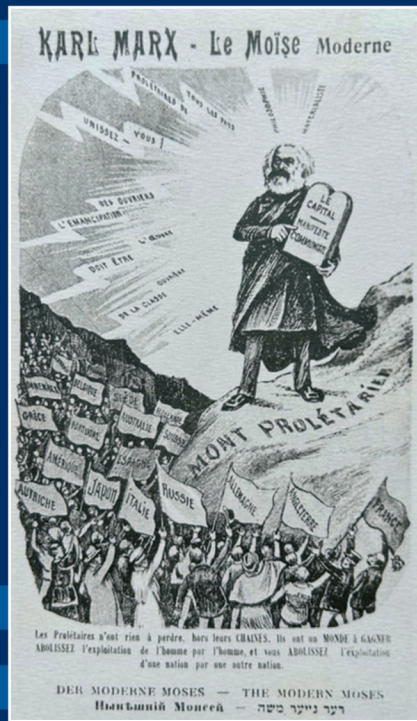
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# Moses among the Moderns

## *German Constructions of Biblical Law, 1750–1930*

Edited by Paul Michael Kurtz

SCIENTIFIC AND LEARNED CULTURES AND THEIR INSTITUTIONS

Series Editor

MORDECHAI FEINGOLD

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# Scientific and Learned Cultures and Their Institutions

*Edited by*

Mordechai Feingold (*California Institute of Technology*)

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# The Rise of Jewish Mythology

## *Biblical Exegesis and the Scientific Study of Myth*

*Carlotta Santini*

Inevitably, any comparative study aimed at investigating the contacts, exchanges, and crossovers between two of the most important and richest interpretative traditions of modernity – the philological of classical erudition and exegetical of biblical learning – cannot help but issue a long list of caveats: theoretical, empirical, circumstantial. Biblical exegesis in Germany (Protestant, Jewish, Catholic) is an old and deeply rooted tradition. Its disciplinary autonomy is perhaps one of the most important factors that allow us to speak of a certain exchange between the mythological study of ancient Greece and the interpretation of the Bible, but never a true assimilation. There are also other causes – simpler ones but, for this very reason, more difficult to evade.

Let us start with something immediate and perhaps naïf. In their handbook *Hebrew Myths* (1963), one of the most widely diffused and popularized texts on Jewish mythology, Robert Graves and Raphael Patai introduced their attempt to define a mythological corpus within the book of Genesis as follows:

The word ‘myth’ is Greek, mythology is a Greek concept, and the study of mythology is based on Greek examples. Literalists who deny that the Bible contains any myths at all are, in a sense justified. Most other myths deal with gods and goddesses who takes sides in human affairs, each favouring rival heroes; whereas the Bible acknowledges only a single universal God.<sup>1</sup>

Far from ignoring the achievements of the history of religions, which has recongized the origins of Hebraic religion in the melting pot of the ancient Middle East, this distinction between monotheism and polytheism in the opening pages of a book on Jewish mythology hints at a fundamental interpretative problem. For if Jewish *Urmonotheismus* is not a historical fact, it is certainly a cultural one, reiterated in different historical stages from antiquity

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1 Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (New York, 1964), 11.

to modernity, which served the most diverse purposes: ideological, political, cultural. And this bias (in many senses still alive today), this cultural construction, has been considered a fact – a fact of faith – which has influenced the most enlightened scholars.

While the study of ancient texts has mostly been guided by historical or antiquarian interests, the study of biblical texts is not unfamiliar with doctrinal and dogmatic concerns. This is particularly true in the case of mythological studies. Recall that even in field of classics, which due to the character of its materials was mostly free from this kind of concern, a certain aversion to myth arose and strongly influenced the beginnings of classical mythological studies. The ancient prejudice against the *Graecia Mendax*, mother of poets, which represented myth as nothing more than a fable and childish invention, could not fail to manifest itself even more strongly in the case of the sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition. If myth itself already does not enjoy good publicity, how daringly and with what strategies can it be applied not only to the study of a religion of the past, but also to the analysis of the living sources of the dominant religion of the present?

In this chapter, I will address the crucial question of the relationship between the tradition of classical studies and that of Jewish studies, in particular biblical studies, focusing on the first attempts at a mythological approach to the Bible by the authors of the second half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. By no means is this contribution intended to be an exhaustive report on the modern history of Jewish mythology studies, nor even on the Science of Mythology as such. What I would like to show, through some chosen readings, are the conscious or unconscious frictions – conceptual, doctrinal, and interpretive frictions – that permeate the work of the scholars who first applied themselves to the definition of this hinge field.

The starting point of our analysis is given by the introduction in the scholarly panorama at the end of the eighteenth century of a new theoretical and hermeneutical instrument, which determined a turn in the methodological approach to ancient texts: namely, the concept of myth. The term was first adopted by Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729–1812) to designate the tradition of tales about the gods and heroes of antiquity handed down in poetic texts. It was thus meant to replace the more generic and epistemologically less pregnant Germanic term *Fabel* (from the Latin *fabula*: fable or tale). This innovation sparked a heated debate in classical studies, dividing scholars between those who accepted to use the term and those who rejected it.

This *querelle* lasted more than a century: a telling instance comes from one of the last actors in that debate, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1848–1931), who refused to adopt the term *Mythos* and used the even more specific – and in

this case imprecise – German term *Sage* (legend, but used mostly for German and Nordic epic sagas) or simply the generic term *Geschichte* (history). In the panorama of Jewish studies, Micha Josef Bin-Gorion (1865–1921) chose the term ‘Saga’, like Wilamowitz, and thereby underlined the epic and historical narrative character of biblical tales. Louis Ginzberg (1873–1953), for his part, preferred to adopt the term ‘legend’, which reinforced the historical value of the biblical tradition.

Yet hidden within this terminological debate was a much more substantial, and fundamental, which impacted philosophical and theological circles alike: the question of the very essence of the religious phenomenon expressed by mythical accounts and forms. With Heyne, we witness a re-evaluation of mythological materials that now convey a deeper, true content. Translating the language encoded in images of myth, he argued, could uncover ancient *Weltanschauungen* and expose the original dimension of ancient religious feeling. The University of Göttingen became the centre of diffusion for this approach to myth, where Heyne was active and scholars like Karl Otfried Müller (1797–1840) and Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker (1784–1868) inaugurated a new discipline within the field of classical philology. Scientific mythology – focused above all on ancient Greece – aimed to investigate the laws that governed myth and to fashion, as a result, a hermeneutical key able to explicate its contents.

For this analysis, I will discuss a series of case studies with special attention to scholars at work in both areas – biblical and classical studies – who were involved in different ways (for or against) in what can be called the ‘mythological shift’. This particular scope will allow me to highlight the changing fortunes of myth as an applied concept together with its epistemological implications for biblical exegesis. First, I discuss one of the most influential exegetes in the history of scholarship, Robert Lowth (1710–1787). Though active before what we might call Heyne’s ‘mythological shift’, Lowth was among the first to impose methodological demands and open up hermeneutical spaces in the context of biblical scholarship, which the mythological approach soon challenged.

Second, I turn to an early manual on classical mythology, written by Martin Gottfried Hermann (1755–1822) and prefaced by Heyne himself. Here the terminological innovation as well as the scale of Heyne’s proposal for an axiological re-evaluation of ancient myth can also be measured by examining the strategies of adoption of this term in the work of his contemporaries and closest collaborators. In fact, ‘myth’ seems to have morphed into an inescapable point of reference – a concept nearly everyone was compelled either to accept or to reject. A shining example of the kind of diatribe that the decision for or against the use of ‘myth’ – and, by extension, for or against the Göttingen

School of Mythology – appears in disagreements between Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), one of the most celebrated biblical scholars – also trained in Göttingen – and his editor/commentator Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826). Their complicated, and controversial, relationship serves as a sort of mirror for all successive (mis)understandings in Jewish studies and further testifies to the unavoidable ambiguity, which still persists, on the meanings necessarily implied in the case of ‘Jewish myths’.

Finally, I discuss in brief two parallel and somewhat alternative approaches to myth in Jewish antiquity: by Georg Lorenz Bauer (1755–1806) and Friedrich August Carus (1770–1807). Bauer implemented the rigorous methods of the new scientific mythology and presented a coherent system of ancient Jewish myth, thus doing for the Hebrews what Karl Otfried Müller did for the Greeks. Carus, though less known among scholars in classics, is in reality a core figure in the intellectual history of the century. His method, also tied to the positions of Eichhorn, integrated a psychological and anthropological approach to ancient Jewish mythology and inaugurated a would-be discipline that enjoyed great success during the nineteenth century, with Heymann Steinthal (1823–1899) and Moritz Lazarus (1824–1803), and gained full acknowledgment into the beginning of the twentieth century, with Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920): *Völkerpsychologie*.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Historical and Theoretical Context

This selection of some authors (and omission of others) cuts a path, necessarily circumscribed, to foreground critical issues that can account for the complex process of introducing the concept of myth into the biblical tradition. Before advancing through my reconstruction, it is perhaps useful to sketch a map, however rough, of the social and intellectual context in which this itinerary will move and through which the case studies will acquire depth and coherence. As recently reiterated by Heinz Wissmann, the development of ‘criticism’ and, in particular, philological exactitude (*Akribie*) in textual study traces back to that fertile season of biblical interpretation which the Protestant

2 Commonly translated into English as ‘cultural psychology’ or ‘folk psychology,’ *Völkerpsychologie* studied the psychology of those collectives usually called ‘peoples,’ regardless of whether they belong to a nation or not.

Reformation made possible from the sixteenth century onwards, especially in the Netherlands and the Protestant German lands – a development to which the progressive refinement of classical philology is also indebted.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the Italian humanists, who were more interested in Greek culture (literature, rhetoric, and politics), in Germany the study of ancient languages – especially Greek and Hebrew – aimed to grant an access to the sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition that was free from the prejudice and mediation (and translation) of Catholic tradition. This philological mode of reading the biblical texts was clearly, often self-consciously, opposed to medieval exegesis, which followed a variety of hermeneutical paths: from figural and allegorical to moral and dogmatic.

Throughout the history of its transmission, the Bible has been the object of exegetical approaches just as diverse as the historical, social, and religious contexts of their application over the centuries, even millennia. The stabilization of biblical texts into a canon, moreover, did not constitute single, univocal, isolated moment but rather a long process of arranging divergent components, infusing them with coherence, converging them into holy writ, and, not least, implementing them for moral instruction. Interpretative traditions within Judaism in particular greatly expanded the boundaries of ‘sacred scripture’, through rich phases of transmission, study, and commentary: from the Midrash to the Talmud to the later Kabbalah. Taking these different traditions and their varied viewpoints into account remains essential for understanding ‘the biblical text(s)’. Indeed, long before transforming into a narrow target for the scientific instrument of ‘myth’, materials in ‘the Bible’ that showed a distinctly narrative, imaginative, or poetic character had been the object of study by such exegetical traditions. In some cases, those same modes of Jewish interpretation had helped expand the frontiers of marvelous or fantastic element in the sacred texts themselves, reinterpreting, expanding, and enriching the heritage of biblical legends.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore towards all these exegetical traditions that the science of myth had to show its innovativeness. Yet the study of ancient myth also took its first steps on unstable ground. Despite its claims to being neutral and scientific – following Enlightenment ambitions and ideals, which culminated in the positivism of the later nineteenth century – the mythological approach has still not been fully secularized. The reason is a persistence of confessional premises as its very foundation. Those premises were built into the discipline of humanist

3 Heinz Wismann, *Penser entre les langues* (Paris, 2012).

4 Cf. Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg, *I Have Always Loved the Holy Tongue: Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

philology itself, which, into the eighteenth century, was conceived as *ancilla fidei*, the 'handmaid of faith'. The first challenge presented to the new mythological method was related to basic theological claims, according to which science cannot impose itself on faith. This means that, paradoxically, the scientific study of mythology should not criticize faith, but neither can it claim to confirm it. Rather, the mythological approach sought to strike a balance – difficult, often unequal – that held faith and science together. The perception of any balance struck, however, proved quite subjective indeed, based on the specific intellectual and moral needs of the individual scholars involved.

The participants of this debate over mythology were diverse on any number of levels: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish thinkers (on a very large spectrum of religious observance and disciplinary affiliation), philosophers, historians, and philologists, as well as scholars interested in anthropology and psychology. Bringing high stakes to the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which began to consolidate at the start of the nineteenth century, were the comparison of cultures, the delimitation of Germanness, with its philhellenism, and the recognition of Jewish tradition as a field worthy of study.<sup>5</sup> It was a complex confrontation, both cultural and social, one that involved the elites of German and Jewish communities.

By increasingly orienting themselves toward classicism, opting to convert to Christianity, and embracing German nationalist positions, especially at the end of the century, scholars of Jewish heritage gradually gained a place alongside German colleagues in the institutions of cultural and civil life. Movements of Jewish assimilation or accommodation – associated with terms like *Deutsches Judentum* (German Judaism) or *Jüdische Aufklärung* (Jewish Enlightenment) – often bore a secularizing connotation, including the rejection of ancestral faith and proselytism, and the integration into the dominant non-Jewish society. In other cases, Jews made fewer concessions. Representing this second stance, which affirmed a distinction as well as fruitful exchange between Jewish and German cultures, was the eclectic philologist Jacob Bernays (1824–1881). Representing one of the final acts in social and cultural recognition of the Jewish intelligentsia in modern European culture was the opening of the Berlin *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Higher Institute for Jewish Studies), in 1872, where Heymann Steinthal (1823–1899) was also engaged.

These contours remain essential for understanding the conditions and perspectives in which the study of Jewish myth developed from the late eighteenth

5 For more on Steinthal and Lazarus as well as the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, see the chapter by Irene Zwiep in this volume.

to early nineteenth century. On one hand, scholars felt a distinct need to press the Bible into the domain of science and free it from the exclusive prerogative of faith, manifested in both Protestant and Jewish orthodoxy. They aimed to recognize in biblical writings not only, and above all, 'sacred scripture' but also the textual artifacts of a culture as much Jewish as it was Christian – which deserved serious intellectual attention no less than classical antiquity, if not an even higher rank. In this context, Athens and Jerusalem became an extremely significant pairing, as did Homer and Moses – the 'authors' of the stories of Greeks and Jews, respectively.<sup>6</sup> For Jewish thinkers, this juxtaposition became all the more explicit. As Arnaldo Momigliano showed in *Pagine ebraiche*, they used such pairings to reassert and legitimate their double belonging, or rather their double cultural confession: German and Jewish alike and, for this reason, all the better scholars of antiquity.<sup>7</sup> It was precisely the entry afforded by ancient Judaism to Greek and Roman antiquity – the temple of classicizing German culture – that inspired Bernays, equally skilled in Greek and Hebrew, to utter the famous words: 'How sad that Goethe didn't know Hebrew like I do!'<sup>8</sup>

6 Bernd Witte, *Moses und Homer. Griechen, Juden Deutsche: Eine andere Geschichte der deutschen Kultur* (Berlin, 2018). On the polemical use of this structuring in Protestant historiography of ancient Judaism, see Simon Goldhill, 'What Has Alexandria to Do with Jerusalem? Writing the History of the Jews in the Nineteenth Century', *Historical Journal* 59 (2016), 125–51.

7 Arnaldo Momigliano, *Pagine Ebraiche* (Rome, 1987); see also Theodor Dunkelgrün, 'The Philology of Judaism: Zacharias Frankel, the Septuagint, and the Jewish Study of Ancient Greek in the Nineteenth Century', in *Classical Philology and Theology: Entanglement, Disavowal, and the Godlike Scholar*, eds Catherine Conybeare and Simon Goldhill (Cambridge, 2020), 63–85.

8 Jacob Bernays, *Jugenderinnerungen und Bekenntnisse* (Berlin, 1900), 104. For more on Bernays, see Paul Michael Kurtz, 'Defining Hellenistic Jews in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Case of Jacob Bernays and Jacob Freudenthal', *Erudition & the Republic of Letters* 5 (2020), 308–42. The aversion of the father of *Deutsche Klassik*, Goethe, toward Jewish culture is the subject of a recent study by Karin Schutjer, *Goethe and Judaism: The Troubled Inheritance of Modern Literature* (Evanston, 2015). The topic bears direct relevance here since it is precisely Goethe's approach – his use of certain biblical motifs – that would have an important legacy over the *longue durée* in mythological studies. One need only recall the *Flight into Egypt*, the famous incipit of his *Wanderjahre*. In the economy of the work, this scene plays the role of not only a mystery or sacred representation but also a mythical archetype, in the sense the mythologist Karoly Kerényi gave to this term: an eternal model, pre-constituted, to which the characters, the carpenter Joseph and his Mary of the novel, conform themselves. Furthermore, one could consider Goethe's intention to rewrite the history of Joseph (Gen 37–50) expressed in his *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 4 vols (Leipzig, 1811–33), 1:333. Such a project was finally realized by Thomas Mann, in the 'most mythological' of his books, the tetralogy *Joseph und seine Brüder* (Berlin, 1933–43). The mediation between Goethe and Mann on the story of Joseph was made possible by Micha Josef Bin-Gorion (Berdyczewski), one of the most important scholars of the



A final node for mapping this context is the status of the Bible. The authors under review never truly questioned the privileged position of biblical texts, which impacted how they understood Jewish myths. Although in 1861 Benjamin Jowett could scandalously state that scripture had to be interpreted like any other book,<sup>9</sup> this statement was still problematic enough more than one century later, at the time Arnaldo Momigliano spoke in front of a specialized public of biblical exegetes in Dallas:

Let me admit from the start that I am rather impervious to any claim that sacred history poses problems, which are not those of profane history. As a man trained from early days to read the Bible in Hebrew, Livy in Latin and Herodotus in Greek, I have never found the task of interpreting the Bible any more or any less complex than that of interpreting Livy or Herodotus. Livy is of course less self-assured about the truth of what he tells us about Romulus than the Pentateuch is about Abraham. But the basic elements of a sacred history are in Livy as much as in the Pentateuch.<sup>10</sup>

With this equation of profane and sacred narratives, Momigliano provocatively contradicts the theoretical premise that operated so powerfully for so many scholars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, their inquiries made them feel all the more obliged to reflect on the legitimacy of applying the same critical instruments to these two corpora from antiquity – the biblical and the classical – which are as different *de jure* as *de facto*. The question of ‘legitimacy’ for the method arises precisely from the difficulty in establishing a homogeneity between the objects of analysis themselves.

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- push to rediscover Jewish mythology at the beginning of the twentieth century, with his most interesting *Joseph und seine Brüder. Ein altjüdischer Roman*, repr. (Berlin, 1933 [1917]).
- 9 Benjamin Jowett, ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’, in *Essays and Reviews* (London, 1860), 338. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this volume, who reminded me of this reference, which serves to reinforce Momigliano’s argument.
- 10 Arnaldo Momigliano, ‘Biblical Studies and Classical Studies: Simple Reflections upon Historical Method’, *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, 3rd Series, 11 (1981), n. 1, 25. Address at the centennial conference of the Society of Biblical Literature in Dallas, 6 November 1980.
- 11 See also Arnaldo Momigliano, ‘Religious History Without Frontiers: J. Wellhausen, U. Wilamowitz, and E. Schwartz’, *History and Theory*, 21/4, Beiheft 21: ‘New Paths of Classicism in the Nineteenth Century’ (1982), 49–64.



## 2 The Status of Biblical Poetry: Robert Lowth

Turning to key moments in the development of a mythological approach to biblical texts, we begin in Oxford with Robert Lowth and his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, first published in Latin in 1753. Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791), the great orientalist and interpreter of Moses, annotated and republished these lectures in Göttingen five years later, thus introducing Lowth's formative ideas to German intellectual circles.<sup>12</sup> Two centuries before Momigliano, Lowth expressed the same demand for an analytical consistency for the biblical and classical traditions, in almost the same words:

That Poetry which proceeds from divine inspiration is not beyond the province of criticism. Criticism will enable us to account for the origin of the art, as well as to form a just estimation of its dignity. ... It would not be easy, indeed, to assign a reason, why the writings of Homer, of Pindar, and of Horace, should engross our attention and monopolize our praise, while those of Moss, of David, and Isaiah, pass totally unregarded. Shall we suppose that the subject is not adapted to a seminary in which sacred literature has ever maintained a precedence? Shall we say, that it is foreign to this assembly of promising youth, of whom the greater part have consecrated the best portion of their time and labour to the same department of learning? Or must we conclude, that the writings of those men who have accomplished only as much as human genius and ability could accomplish, should be reduced to method and theory; but that those which boast a much higher origin, and are justly attributed to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, may be considered as indeed illustrious by their native force and beauty, but not as conformable to the principles of science, not to be circumscribed by any rules of art?<sup>13</sup>

Preceding Heyne's claim for work on myth, Lowth shows the same methodological insistence for scientific study – in this case, on a poetic analysis of the

<sup>12</sup> The Latin edition of his *De sacra poesi Hebræorum, prælectiones academicæ Oxonii habitæ* was first published in Oxford, in 1753, and republished in two volumes, by Michaelis, in Göttingen, in 1758. This latter 'German edition' was the more important for the legacy of this work, since it underwent many editions and wide circulation, especially in Germany. It also became the basis for the first English translation, of 1787, by George Gregory. On Michaelis, see further the chapters by Ofry Ilany, Michael Ledger-Lomas, and Irene Zwiep in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. George Gregory, with notes by Michaelis and others, 3rd ed. (London, 1835), 21–22.



FIGURE 6 Relief of Moses (left) and Homer (right) on the Louvre, Paris. On the east façade of the Lemercier Wing and west façade of the Square Court, respectively. Sculpture by Jean-Guillaume Moitte and Antoine-Denis Chaudet, 1806.

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Bible. A distinctive British tradition – still observable today, in some of the most prestigious chairs on both sides of the Anglophone Atlantic – has long framed classical studies within the broader *cursus studiorum* of rhetoric and poetry.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Lowth himself was bishop and professor of poetry at Oxford. Within this tradition of erudition, the interpretation of texts (ancient and modern alike) proved thoroughly formal, with a focus on issues of poetic genre, style, composition, and vocabulary. It was precisely this mode of investigation – addressing poetry in an ostensibly unhistorical way – that allowed Lowth to apply the same tools of analysis to Moses and Homer equally (Figure 6).

14 It is in this proto-comparativism of literature that we first encounter famous Homerists Alexander Pope (1688–1744) and Thomas Blackwell (1701–1757). But one could continue into the present day, with figures like Robert Fagles (1933–2008), translator of Homer and Sophocles and expert of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and John Milton (1608–1674).

Lowth interests us because he establishes parallels (however specious at times) between classical images and biblical descriptions. Reading the former as metaphor and the latter as allegory, he proposes a comparative study to identify elements of a common epic genre in both the *Iliad* and the Bible. Leaving aside his formal textual analysis and his pseudo-historical thesis of a shared genesis for Hellenic and Hebraic poetic themes (both, he argued, derived from Egyptian fables), there is one intuition that can be considered substantial. Lowth speaks of the scriptures, unsurprisingly, as the texts of revelation, the result of divine inspiration. But even the Greeks, he claims, believed that poetry had derived from the gods, particularly the Muses. This parallel, which was only meant to reinforce the rights of the literary study of holy texts, is likely to suggest – and this is how it will be read by later scholars – that the same status of ‘revelation’ can be assigned to the Bible and the *Iliad*. Fifty years later, for example, Bauer would take this point much further, stating that the concept of a scripture inspired by God – like the idea of inspiration from the Muses – was itself a myth. The works of Homer and Moses should therefore enjoy the same legitimacy since both were inspired by God. Any difference is quantitative, not qualitative. The ancient works differ in the degree to which they provide a witness to God: an obscure, confused revelation given to the Greeks; a clear, distinct one granted to the Hebrews through Moses: textbook deism, so to speak. For Lowth, this relationship between classical and biblical poetry cannot be separated from the stylistic simplicity of the Bible, which contrasts the complex constructions of Homer.

Though of clear biblical and, more broadly, theological derivation, the question of ‘revelation’ – translated into an epistemological theory – would prove to be a foundational idea in the new mythological approach to the classical tradition. The idea of a progressive revelation of the divine, passing through the centuries as well as the different perceptive and cognitive capacities of humanity, became central in Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling’s (1775–1854) 1842 *Philosophie der Mythologie*. The philosopher also dedicated an entire work to elucidating the different degrees of apprehending revelation in his *Philosophie der Offenbarung* (1854).<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Creuzer (1771–1858), one of the key figures in Heidelberg romanticism – an intellectual current that called for a rediscovery of myth at the start of nineteenth century – also made revelation

15 Friedrich Schelling, ‘Philosophie der Mythologie’, in *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke*, section 2, vol. 2, ed. Carl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart, 1857); idem, ‘Philosophie der Offenbarung’, in *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke*, section 2, vols 3–4, ed. Carl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart, 1858).

(*Offenbarung*) the crucial concept in his epistemology of religious perception, which he articulated in the degrees of symbol, myth, and allegory.

### 3 A New Science of Myth: Christian Gottlob Heyne and Martin Gottfried Hermann

If Lowth attempted to place Homer and Moses on the same level in order to justify his literary and critical approach to the Bible, Christian Gottlob Heyne reversed the perspective. This expert on Homer, friend of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1802), and founder of the Göttingen School of Mythology justified the study of ancient myth by resorting to the *auctoritas* of the Bible.

In 1787, Heyne composed a foreword to one of the first modern manuals for the study of mythology: the *Handbuch der Mythologie aus Homer und Hesiod als Grundlage zu einer richtigen Fabellehre des Altertums* (*Handbook of the Mythology from Homer and Hesiod as Basis for a proper Teaching of Fables from Antiquity*) by Martin Gottfried Hermann.<sup>16</sup> Presenting this book that consciously proposed a new theory of myth in ancient Greece, Heyne invokes nothing short of the Bible itself to set out the science of mythology:

If mythology is nothing more than the epitome [*Inbegriff*] of fables, fictions and unrhymed fairy tales, or even pieces of pagan superstition, its usefulness is very limited, and it is to be deplored that the reading of the poets and the study of the ancients makes it necessary not to be completely foreign to these fairy tales. But matters run somewhat differently. Mythology is in itself the oldest history and oldest philosophy; the essence [*Inbegriff*] of the old folk and tribal sagas expressed in the old raw language; and viewed from this side it receives a new value, as a remnant of the oldest imaginations and expressions. [...] This is what the experience of the legends collected by Moses teaches to us.<sup>17</sup>

The position here clearly reflects Euhemerism, common in the eighteenth century and especially popular in France, with figures like Antoine Banier (1673–1741) and Noël-Antoine Pluche (1688–1761).<sup>18</sup> But as this last sentence suggests,

16 Martin Gottfried Hermann, *Handbuch der Mythologie aus Homer und Hesiod als Grundlage zu einer richtigen Fabellehre des Altertums* (Berlin-Stettin, 1787).

17 Christian Gottlob Heyne, 'Vorrede', in *ibid.*, a3.

18 Cf. Antoine Banier, *Explication historique des fables, où l'on découvre leur origine & leur conformité avec l'histoire ancienne, & où l'on rapporte les époques des héros & des*

Heyne uses biblical *auctoritas* as a pretext, as a form of *captatio benevolentiae* (the rhetorical technique of ‘winning goodwill’). He submits an uncontroversial argument only to reverse it, employing that argument as a picklock to burglarize the very authority which seemed to hold it secure.

A few pages later, he goes so far as to argue that the dangerous Greek mythology (i.e. Greek poetry, as with Lowth) even provides the key to interpreting scripture. In a passage worth quoting at length, Heyne claims:

A well-articulated presentation of mythology, in which the young scholar gets to know it after its origin, its first form, then after its formation and transformation; and thus he receives just by these means reasonable concepts about the early state of the peoples, about the first steps of culture, about the modes of imagining of the ancient world, which are the seeds of their concepts of religion and philosophy, which once again emerged all the more gloriously and brilliantly among the Greeks, and which at the same time provided the right basic concepts for the interpretation of the ancient writers, and consequently of the holy writers, in whom there are still pieces and remnants from that early age, whose misunderstanding had so many sad consequences. Such a lecture deserves a recommendation, and so far I hope to see myself justified if I have considered the first attempt of this kind not unworthy of public approval.<sup>19</sup>

In his foreword, Heyne proves himself a master at three-card monte. He uses the Bible to legitimate the study of myth and, vice versa, fashions mythology into a hermeneutical lens for the Bible. Hermann, from his side, could not avoid openly dealing with the difficulties of definition and systematic organization of the mythical materials, which are inescapable in the conception of a handbook. When defining the object of his treatise, he cannot hide behind rhetorical ambiguity, as did Heyne. Rather, he must reaffirm, all the more firmly, that Homer was not Moses, that the gods of Greek myth are not the one and only God of the Bible. His manual thus begins with an ‘Abhandlung über die Götter Homers’ (‘Treatment on the Gods of Homer’), which constitutes nothing less than an essay on the concept of divinity.

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*principaux événemens dont il est fait mention*, 2 vols (Paris, 1711); idem, *La mythologie et les fables expliquées par l'histoire*, 8 vols (Paris, 1738); Noël-Antoine Pluche, *Histoire du ciel, considéré selon les idées des poètes, des philosophes, et de Moïse*, 2 vols (Paris, 1739).

19 Christian Gottlob Heyne, ‘Vorrede’, a8.

In this *Abhandlung*, Hermann maintains that the concept of divinity (*Gottheit*) is not the same among all peoples, just as it is not the same in childhood and adulthood of a single person. The idea of divinity among the ancient Greeks, so Hermann, was no more than a glorified man: stronger, faster, more beautiful.<sup>20</sup> But Greek gods, he continues, could be wounded. They are neither eternal nor immortal, according to the sense Christian theology gave to these terms. At most, they can be said to be everlasting, in that they persist: lasting longer and enduring more than mortals but still subject to fate (*Thyche*) and destiny (*Moirai*). Hermann does not spare the gods of Greece the traditional accusation of ancient philosophers either, as by Epicurus and others: that they are slaves to the passions and devoid of morals. But according to Hermann, the more humanity progresses and civilization advances, the more the idea of divinity develops. In the end, Hermann believes he and his contemporaries – the sons of an advanced age in human history – cannot rightly define the Greek gods as *Gottheiten* (divinities) but should, instead, call them *göttliche Wesen* (divine beings).<sup>21</sup>

#### 4 Dialogue of the Deaf: Johann Gottfried Eichhorn and Johann Philipp Gabler

A noticeable gap stood between Heyne's foreword and Hermann's manual. Whereas Heyne supplied a conceptual innovation – however much he hid

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, in a famous fragment, referred to this same idea that conceives of the gods as 'Supermen': 'Living on mountains, travelling a lot, getting around quickly – in all this we can already equate ourselves with the Greek gods. We also know the past and almost the future. What would a Greek have said if he could see us?': Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, section 4, vol. 1, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth (Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen IV)*, *Nachgelassene Fragmente, Anfang 1875 bis Frühling 1876*, eds Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, 1967), 5[116] (pp. 146–47).

<sup>21</sup> The validity of these divine beings was not – so Hermann – to be considered panhellenic but dependent on local circumstance, linked as they were to particular regions or cities. Religiosity thus took the form of polytheism in Greece, since no other system could have developed in such a fragmented society. This position will be developed later, and much more consciously, by Wilamowitz, for whom a Greek deity, such as Artemis, could not rightly be considered the same god in all places in Greece (mainland, islands, Ionian coast; or Thrace) simply because it bore the same name everywhere. Wilamowitz himself investigated the local specificities for each epiphany of great mythological figures, through the various epithets they received in any given place and argued for their possible derivation from local deities that belonged to the different traditions of individual lineages that ultimately constituted the great jumble that we call 'Greece'.



himself behind the ambiguities afforded by rhetoric – Hermann always feared the opposition his work might stir, not only from philologists but, worse, from theologians. Providing another, still more striking example of the kind of divergence that can arise between an introduction and a treatise, between an author and an editor (truth be told, a phenomenon as common now as in the eighteenth century) is Johann Gottfried Eichhorn and his famous *Urgeschichte. Ein Versuch (Primeal History: An Essay)*, a book that has been read as a manifesto for the science of myth as applied to the study of the Bible.

Eichhorn's *Urgeschichte* has a remarkable editorial history. The work, not a tome at first but a treatise in a specialist journal, provided a new interpretation to the first three chapters of Genesis. When first published in 1779, moreover, it appeared anonymously: this already offers an important clue to the kind of concerns the author had about the potential reception of his work.<sup>22</sup> Yet so successful was *Urgeschichte* that its author was soon revealed. In 1790, the essay underwent augmentation for a new edition, becoming a sizable work three volumes in length.<sup>23</sup> The first half of volume one contains an introduction and commentary by Johann Philipp Gabler, a theologian trained by Eichhorn and Johann Jakob Griesbach (1745–1812). The second half then transitions to part one of Eichhorn's original *Urgeschichte*, supplemented with extensive notes by Gabler. While volume two comes entirely from Gabler, volume three includes, again, an extensive introduction by Gabler followed by the second and last part of Eichhorn's *Urgeschichte*, once more with copious notes from Gabler.

This work requires, then, the greatest of caution for analysis. When a statement is attributed to Eichhorn (whether by his contemporaries or today), it is not always, in fact, by Eichhorn himself. Rather, often it is Eichhorn through Gabler or, perhaps, even only Gabler. Indeed, the editor may well be speaking through the mouth of the author at times. Gabler's own theses frequently come in more assertive formulation than those of Eichhorn, and in many cases, he forces and distorts their meaning.

A very telling example of this kind of distortion is that Eichhorn – clearly – does not speak of 'myth' in his text. It is rather Gabler himself who subscribes to Heyne's terminological reform and deliberately places Eichhorn in this same current as well. According to Eichhorn, scripture poses many hermeneutical problems – with a style far from any historiographical narrative and an abundance of tropes – but it cannot, and should not, be considered myth: 'So

22 Anonymous [Johann Gottfried Eichhorn], 'Urgeschichte. Ein Versuch', in 2 Parts, *Repertorium für Biblische und Morgenländische Litteratur* 4 (1779), 129–256.

23 Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Urgeschichte*, ed. Johann Philipp Gabler, 3 vols (Aldorf-Nürnberg, 1790–95).

not mythology, not allegory, but true history'.<sup>24</sup> Strikingly, the explanatory note by Gabler to this explicit assertion by Eichhorn misses the point entirely and proposes a completely different interpretation, one in line with Heyne:

N. 37: I too do not accept any allegory in this text, since all, even the most subtle, allegorical interpretations have so much against them; the mythical explanation alone is certainly the only true one.<sup>25</sup>

As this brief quotation clearly demonstrates, Gabler reads Eichhorn and comments on his arguments based on his own understanding and his own theoretical positions. Gabler's notes can be considered as a book within the book, which carefully and consciously diverges from the thesis expressed by Eichhorn. The result is a book with two heads, a dialogue of the deaf.

Although he refuses to use the term myth, making his own the concern to preserve the credibility of sacred history, Eichhorn does not turn a deaf ear to the new instances raised by the science of myth. How does he explain the inconsistencies and the many poetic, even fantastic, images of the sacred text if he refuses to regard them as myths? He refers to what 'must have been' the typical way of thinking at the time they were conceived (*Denkungsart seines Zeitalters*). The biblical author, so Eichhorn, lets God act effectively and unmediated, as a personified natural force. This line of thinking – an argument for accommodation, where simpler people needed explanation in their own terms – does, indeed, trace back even earlier, into the seventeenth century, but it nonetheless continued to contrast much of Christian theology even in Eichhorn's time, which held that God did act in the world but primarily in a mediated way, through the forces of nature he himself created.

Are we to conclude, then, that mythological images and narrative fragments were inserted for etiological purposes, as imaginative explanations without any actual link to fact? Eichhorn proposes a long series of questions ultimately directed at one basic concern: 'is there a place in Revelation for error and falsehood?'<sup>26</sup> For there is no doubt in Eichhorn's mind that such fanciful ideas and anecdotes cannot be true in the strict sense of the word. The classic example commented on by Eichhorn occurs in Genesis, the story of the snake and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If one were to concede that such episodes contain at least some kind of religious content – as Eichhorn did – and

24 Ibid., 3:79.

25 Ibid., 3:79–80, n. 37 by Gabler.

26 Ibid., 3:81.



reveal some kind of truth (allegorically, symbolically, whatever), how could the adoption of images (the tree, the fruit, the snake), which have nothing to do with the divine, be justified?

Eichhorn explicitly denies any arbitrariness in the biblical text and eliminates any place for this new 'mythological' fashion in biblical interpretation, which seeks mysterious meanings behind sacred stories and images. But precisely in this apologetic effort, he becomes more royalist than the king. Paradoxically, his response turns more radical than that of any ancient exegete, or even modern mythologist. In the opinion of Eichhorn, the snake must be taken literally. Should interpreters therefore believe in a talking snake? Not necessarily, he argues, but certainly at the time the book of Genesis was conceived, such a marvelous event would not have seemed unbelievable. Consequently, if the story of the snake is not true in itself, it was true from viewpoint of the biblical author. Since the marvelous corresponds to the original mentality that made the biblical text, the very presence of such fantastic elements only further confirms, for Eichhorn, the great antiquity and credibility of sacred scripture itself. Ultimately, Eichhorn's explanation centered on the mentality of biblical authors, whereas Heyne focused on a form of historical understanding.

## 5 Biblical Mythology: Georg Lorenz Bauer

The strange work of two souls – Eichhorn and Gabler – contradictory in their approaches, assumptions, and purposes, *Urgeschichte* nonetheless exerted a tremendous influence on subsequent studies of myth. That influence went in two directions. Eichhorn's approach, which declined to use the term 'myth' and reflected on epistemological legitimacy and internal coherence in the alternative mentality of ancient *Weltanschauungen*, was taken over by representatives of *Völkerpsychologie*, as we will see in the following section. Gabler's approach, which ultimately called into question the hermeneutical tools of the Göttingen School of Mythology, can rather be recognized in the work of Georg Lorenz Bauer, the heir of Heyne for biblical studies and an advocate for the concept of myth.

Let us start small. In 1802, Bauer published *Hebräische Mythologie des alten und neuen Testaments, mit Parallelen aus der Mythologie anderer Völker, vornemlich der Griechen und Römer (Hebrew Mythology of the Old and New Testaments, with Parallels from the Mythology of Other Peoples, Especially the Greeks and Romans)*. Therein he described biblical mythology as follows:

The name mythology ... would have been rejected as profane in the past if it had been applied to the biblical writers, and if a mythology would have been discovered in their books. And even now there are certainly still many who find this name offensive, and who receive no little irritation if the same value has to be recognized to Hebrew legends of the past, as to the legends of all other peoples.<sup>27</sup>

Earlier, in 1794, Heinrich Corrodi (1752–1793) had posed an urgent question with the title of his essay in *Beiträge zur Beförderung des vernünftigen Denkens der Religion*: ‘Whether myths are to be found in the Bible’ – a question he answered in the negative.<sup>28</sup> Against Corrodi, Bauer stated, ‘I felt it necessary to propose a theory of the biblical myths.’<sup>29</sup> He then proposed a division of biblical myths into three kinds: (1) philosophical myths, (2) historical and historical-philosophical myths, and (3) poetic or mixed myths. For each biblical narrative, he argued, one should ask, first, whether or not it is a myth and, if so, what kind of myth it is. Thereafter, and only thereafter, one can consider whether a fact (*Faktum*) – or some other kind of content – might lie behind that myth.

With respect to the Göttingen School, Bauer’s position tends toward greater theoretical abstraction, an approach to myth rather typical of German idealism, especially Schelling, but one also nourished by a genuine historicist intuition. In fact, to Bauer belongs the famous description of myth formation as a great snowball, which advances through oral tradition and accumulates new material all the while.<sup>30</sup> Bauer proved himself adept at refined, complex analysis. Working at the intersection of theoretical currents that would come to define the history of the study of myth in the nineteenth century, he represents the first author to formulate a univocal method for interpreting mythical images and their spiritual contents. As Bauer asserted, ‘These philosophemes have their own manners, in which they are disguised.’<sup>31</sup> To unravel the

27 Georg Lorenz Bauer, *Hebräische Mythologie des alten und neuen Testaments, mit Parallelen aus der Mythologie anderer Völker, vornemlich der Griechen und Römer*, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1802), 1:21.

28 Heinrich Corrodi, ‘Ob in der Bibel Mythe zu finden sind?’, *Beiträge zur Beförderung des vernünftigen Denkens der Religion* 18 (1794), 1–73.

29 Bauer, *Hebräische Mythologie des alten und neuen Testaments*, 1:iv.

30 This vision of historical development as a qualitatively homogeneous accumulation and stratification, in which nothing is lost and which can, in principle, be retraced and explored, reappears in the theories of Friedrich Carl von Savigny’s (1779–1861) Historical School and becomes crucial for the Brothers Grimm and their approach to German myth.

31 Bauer, *Hebräische Mythologie des alten und neuen Testaments*, 1:8.

intertwining of mythical formulations, to understand how myth ‘thinks’, so to speak, Bauer adopted an analogical method to establish correspondences, that is, stable laws for translating mythical images into logical propositions. With this insight, he anticipates the more famous Karl Otfried Müller, who translated the relationships of filiation and, more broadly, the systems of mythical causality into mechanical laws of physical causality (essentially relationships of cause and effect).<sup>32</sup>

The identification of analogies and correspondences between mythical and other language (poetic, sacred, historical) was thus by no means new in biblical exegesis. What distinguished Bauer as an interpreter is his eminently formalistic, almost proto-structuralist method. He opposes any easy comparativism – a position also adopted by Lowth, to a certain extent – which might claim merely external or arbitrary identities between various elements of disparate cultures. Typical examples of this approach appear in the famous *Demonstratio Evangelica* by Bishop Huet (1630–1721), who recognized in every mythical divine couple a recasting of the ancient couple Moses and Sarah.<sup>33</sup> Another example is the attempt by Gerhard Johannes Vossius (1577–1649) to find a correspondence between the figures of Moses, Asclepius, and Mercury because of the common snake staff (*caduceus*).

Instead, Bauer advocates, with great conviction, for the autonomy and relative independence of each individual culture, as would Müller. This position, however, does not prohibit any and all comparison *per se* but recognizes such endeavors as a method for studying the epistemology of humanity in general, not for judging particular cultures as such. As he himself declared, ‘Nothing seems to be more useful than comparing the myths of other peoples, where one sometimes encounters a striking similarity that is not based on an identity of facts, but on the same sentiments and ways of thinking of people at certain levels of culture’.<sup>34</sup> Just as Eichhorn acknowledged difference in the sensibilities and the thought structures (*Denkungsart*) of ancient authors who spoke of God and sacred history in the most ‘natural’ way in this youthful stage of human development, so too, *mutatis mutandis*, Bauer insists on asking about the gnoseological stage of primitive humanity. He distinguishes different degrees of the sensibility (*Empfinden*), intuition (*Anschauen*), and judgment (*Urteilen*), by which the religious consciousness of each individual people progressed. In his own words, he argued,

32 Karl Otfried Müller, *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie* (Göttingen, 1825).

33 Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Demonstratio Evangelica* (Paris, 1679).

34 Bauer, *Hebräische Mythologie des alten und neuen Testaments*, 1:iv.

The distinction of these epochs teaches not only what poets have added arbitrarily, as a fruit of their creative imagination, through which they proved their talent as poets, but, above all, what is far more important, how ideas have expanded and how one can therefore tie in with the old ideas, newer and better ones.<sup>35</sup>

With its anthropological perspective, Bauer's position pioneered an approach to ancient myth that foreshadows the theories of cultural polygenists (with their ideas of 'convergences') as well as the most refined investigations into the migration of cultures and the survival of ideas, as developed in the late nineteenth century. Bauer's interpretation thus allowed for myth to be conceived not only as a universal form, which necessarily emerges from every people in every place at every time, but also as a historical form, linked to the development of culture and the laws of tradition. Far from producing contradictions, his framework comes very close to the history of ideas today. Bauer made it possible to maintain a dual analytical method that can hold together both historical and philosophical demands.

## 6 Hebrew Myth and *Völkerpsychologie*: Friedrich August Carus

One epistemological constant is common to all scholars who adopted 'myth' as a critical category for understanding the biblical tradition. That constant appeared yet again in the final stage of our itinerary through key developments in the study of ancient myth: namely *Völkerpsychologie*. An intellectual stream that flowed alongside the currents of anthropology, philology, and linguistics, *Völkerpsychologie* (translated, only with difficulty, as folk psychology, peoples' psychology, and cultural psychology) proved to be hugely important for the development of Jewish studies, in addition to the earlier movements of *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Its chief representatives, too, belonged to the Jewish intelligentsia who lived and worked at cultural crossroads in modern Europe and beyond (Figure 7).

*Völkerpsychologie* upheld a central assumption, both anthropological and epistemological: the 'human type', in its physical aspects and spiritual faculties, was unique. According to this premise, established by Adolf Bastian (1826–1905), founder of the Berlin School of Anthropology, variation in humankind

35 Ibid., 1:41.

was not physical, physiological, racial, or the like. Rather, it arose through historical developments, in processes of differentiation that separated peoples and nations from one another. Crucially, this principle affirmed an equality of human nature yet an inequality of peoples – an argument already advanced with force by Montesquieu (1689–1755) in his discussion of different legal traditions.

From this theoretical perspective, the phenomenon of differentiation in humankind has to be seen as an epiphenomenon in culture. It came as a consequence of accumulated experience, confrontations between people from disparate *milieux*, progressive changes in various *Weltanschauungen*, and diverse customs and conceptions: in a word, of culture. Studying the psychology of peoples promised access – through the testimonies of different populations – to the larger history of cultural development, ancient and modern alike. Heymann Steinthal described the enterprise as follows:

Through the world of the mind, a chain of causal connections runs as rigorously as through nature. [...] Even in the spiritual world, one might say, no atom is lost; whatever was, remains indestructible; in our spirits live the spirits of all the deceased of all time. This is what is called tradition, transmission, namely the fact that each generation takes up the spiritual inheritance of its fathers. The elements of thought, which are thus transmitted, may, after all, experience various destinies; but they are never destroyed.<sup>36</sup>

Reformulating in cultural terms the Law of the Conservation of Mass, by Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794), Steinthal brings the world of history and culture into the realm of ‘science’.

The choice of Jews as a privileged object of study in *Völkerpsychologie* was, in a sense, unavoidable: if not obligatory. Like Greeks, Chinese, Iranians, and many others, Jews constitute a people with a rich corpus of writings. Yet more than the Greeks or any other people, Jews had maintained an extraordinary cultural coherence and continuity, even without any territorial or political support system. As with early-modern notions of the Hebrew Republic, and as enabled by certain texts in the Hebrew scriptures themselves, the Jewish people once again afforded scholars with an opportunity to study the development

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36 Heymann Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion* (Berlin, 1870), 3, translation and comments by the author.

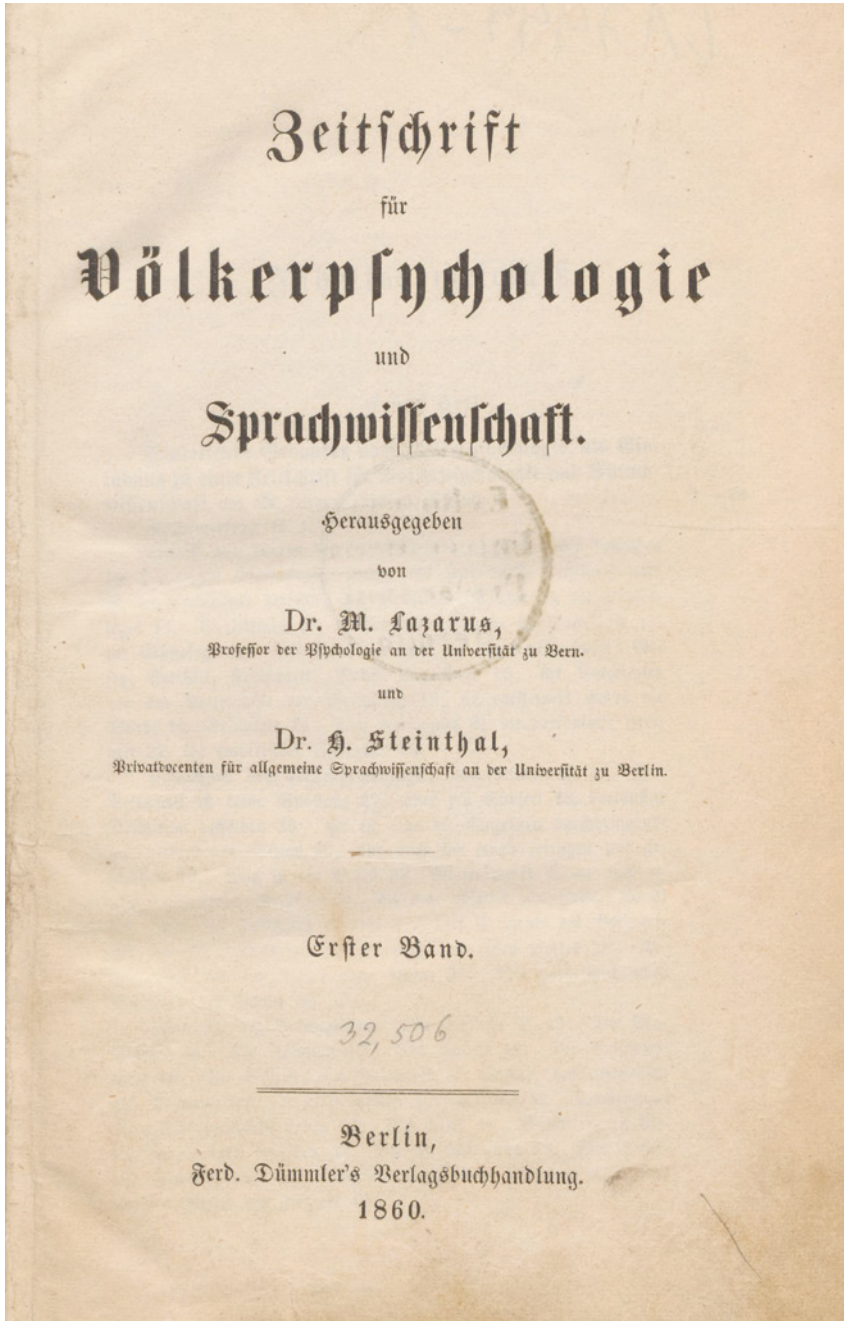


FIGURE 7 Title page of the first volume of *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, 1860

IMAGE FROM DIGI-HUB OF THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY OF THE HUMBOLDT UNIVERSITY IN BERLIN



of the very concept of 'a people' and to follow that idea backwards without ever losing the thread, so to speak.

The great success of *Völkerpsychologie* from the end of the nineteenth into the early twentieth century is, of course, well known, and the final act of this intellectual current – Wilhelm Wundt's *opus magnum* – influenced major psychologists, anthropologists, and philosophers, like Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945).<sup>37</sup> Less familiar, however, is the origin of this science, which owes its birth to a contemporary of Heyne and Bauer: Friedrich August Carus (1770–1807). With his 1809 *Psychologie der Hebräer* (*Psychology of the Hebrews*), Carus sought neither to 'moralize' the biblical material nor to offer a poetic or aesthetic analysis.<sup>38</sup> Rather, he aimed to understand 'how deeply the writers [of the Bible] themselves only (not their explicators) looked into human nature, how far they observed it strictly. The Bible deserves more than any book to be treated with this historical fidelity'.<sup>39</sup> For Carus, there is a 'historicity' to the Bible, but not one of facts or content. Instead, as Eichhorn already pronounced, it is an undeniable historicity of the ancient gaze, that is, the viewpoint of its authors. For the first time, an approach to mythology enhances the psychology of the writer. Accordingly, those who conceived and later wrote down the biblical texts can serve as a kind of psychologist, insofar as these ancient researched and explicated the soul (*Seelenforscher* and *Seelenerklärer*), the *Weltanschauung* of their time.

By analyzing language, belief, and the texts themselves as the work of ancient writers, Carus ventured to reconstruct the history of the Jews as a group who traversed history for thousands of years, coming to define themselves as a people. How did Jews become self-aware as a people, as a nation, from Abraham to the Diaspora and beyond? In Carus's terms, Jewish history constituted the 'History of the Self-Perceiving Psychological Culture of the Nation' *par excellence*. Like Eichhorn and Bauer, he too conducts his inquiry by identifying the 'epistemological' stages of human consciousness: from primary reflexes (*Triebe*) to consummate reason (*Vorstand*), passing through dream images, early etiology, and the development of emotions. Just as much as the Göttingen School of Mythology, exponents of *Völkerpsychologie*,

37 Wilhelm Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie*, 10 vols (Leipzig, 1900–20). For an overview on the rise and fall of this discipline, see Egbert Klautke, 'Völkerpsychologie in 19th-Century Germany: Lazarus, Steinthal, Wundt', in *Doing Humanities in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Efraim Podoksik, Scientific and Learned Cultures and Their Institutions 28 (Leiden, 2020), 243–63.

38 Friedrich August Carus, *Psychologie der Hebräer* (Leipzig, 1809), published posthumously.  
39 *Ibid.*, 23.

especially Steinthal, fully believed in the progress of knowledge, a progress that manifested itself – like the transition from infant unconsciousness to adult knowledge – in the development of peoples from the very beginning of humanity up to the present day. The study of human consciousness as well as the psychic past of individuals thus became a means for understanding the history of psychology for all humanity: a statement later adopted by Jungian psychoanalysis. In this conceptual framework, moderns who undertake the hermeneutical task of interpreting biblical texts are the adults of humankind: adults who read the testimonies from the childhood of humanity.

## 7 Conclusion

The positions of *Völkerpsychologie* do not stand all too distant from those already taken by Hermann in his essay on the concept of divinity and the meaning of ancient religion. For Steinthal, myth is a form of consciousness: it certainly can contain kernels of truth but cannot become fully aware of them. Religion is something more, however, as Hermann stated. It belongs to a higher, more advanced stage in an awareness of the divine. From this point of view, applying the concept of myth as a tool to interpret the biblical texts can ultimately aim only at enhancing the value of the Bible itself, to better understand its stratifications and the different levels of signification contained within the scriptures.

Yet throughout the nineteenth century, there was little willingness to value myth as myth in and of itself, at least in relation to the Bible. Many efforts were undertaken to save the Bible from so-called rationalists or Pyrrhonists, as before. But during this period of hermeneutical innovation, a real risk to sacred texts lay precisely in the value assigned to the new and controversial study of myth.<sup>40</sup> If scholars did not accept that the Bible could be read through the lens of myth, it ran the risk of failing to stand the test of modern science, i.e. history, philology, mythology. Were it not scientifically explained, those unstable, marvelous, and fantastic materials would deprive the sacred book of all credibility and historical legitimacy. The principal objective of these diverse interpretative practices was to save the biblical tradition from sinking into the

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford, 2010).



prejudicial darkness of its 'mythical' materials, precisely by accepting myth as an instrument of analysis. Only in this way could the legitimacy and credibility of the Bible be preserved: that is, by making it a legitimate object of scientific inquiry.

On the other hand, if mythological analysis has since gained recognition, thanks in no small part to its use in studying canonical texts of positive religions, its transfer from the domain of dead to living religions – with all their emotional, confessional, and ideological baggage – has given rise to the first substantial criticism against this would-be science. As Steinthal observed already,

There are philologists [and the thought goes here to Creuzer and Welcker] who have made religion and myth so identical that they measure the power of a people's religiosity on the mass of mythical figures or recognize the power of religion in the creation of myths. No, once again: religion is eternal, it is the supreme sanctuary of man; myth, on the other hand, is a finite form, and destroying the form so that the content may shine all the more pure and brightly is a commanded deed, is the task of our time. By eliminating myth, however, and then mainly through the all-round care of spiritual health, we are also working against those aberrations which are not the cause but the consequence and outbreak of spiritual illness. The unnatural, unhappy marriage of religion and myth would have long since been torn apart if everything connected with it had not had a particularly conservative force. [...] Getting rid of it is what makes us feel most like we have detached ourselves from our parents.<sup>41</sup>

From the very beginning of the new mythological science, and precisely in the context of its first scientification and systematization, we can see *in nuce* the same resistance that would be reiterated and reformulated over a century later, in the process of 'demythologization' of religious science by Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976).

Despite subsequent efforts of nineteenth-century and even present-day mythologists, myth has never fully emancipated itself from the hold of theological commitments: its fixation on the truth-content of myth, how others could believe them, or why we should. Although authors like Creuzer and,

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41 Steinthal, *Mythos und Religion*, 148–49.

later, Karoly Kerényi (1897–1973) recognized its intrinsic value to religion, every time myth has been transferred from ancient to modern religions – still alive and active – the hermeneutical force of mythological analysis has been neutralized and relativized by scholars. Whether then or now, adherence to a particular confession entails undying commitments that inevitably affect the type of scientific inquiry practice on the objects esteemed by faith.

The consequences of such an unresolved ambiguity within academic approaches to Jewish myth manifest themselves still today. The manual *Hebrew Myths* (1963) by Patai and Graves, which opened this chapter, offers another excellent example of this perspective. The theoretical positions of its authors express far too much mutual independence for it to be a two-person work. Where we recognize the hand of Graves, a trained classical scholar and ethnologist educated within the Protestant faith, we find an interpretation of biblical narratives according to different criteria, ranging from anthropological structuralism to morphological study of mythical archetypes to comparison of myths. Graves' aim is clearly to treat the biblical material in the same way as classical materials, highlighting the constant forms and dynamics of all myths and their superhistorical and potentially universally valid meaning. When, instead, the pen moves on to Patai, a prominent ethnologist who grew up in an international and at the same time conservative Jewish milieu, those same 'myths' receive a well-circumscribed historical interpretation – almost euhemeristic – inscribed with a conscious process of past elaboration by the Jewish nation. The term 'myth' is barely preserved in the sections of Patai, but it loses all structural, archetypal, and philosophical connotations.

If taken literally, the two interpretations – each perfectly defensible – can only contradict one other. They leave the reader with the task of answering the underlying enigma: whether biblical tales are a necessary product of the human imagination, which manifest some kind of epistemological truths, or whether they constitute more or less faithful accounts of the development – as much sacred as historical – of Jews ancient and modern into a people. The work of Moses, as ancestor, as deliverer, as lawgiver, may fall on either side of the equation.

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