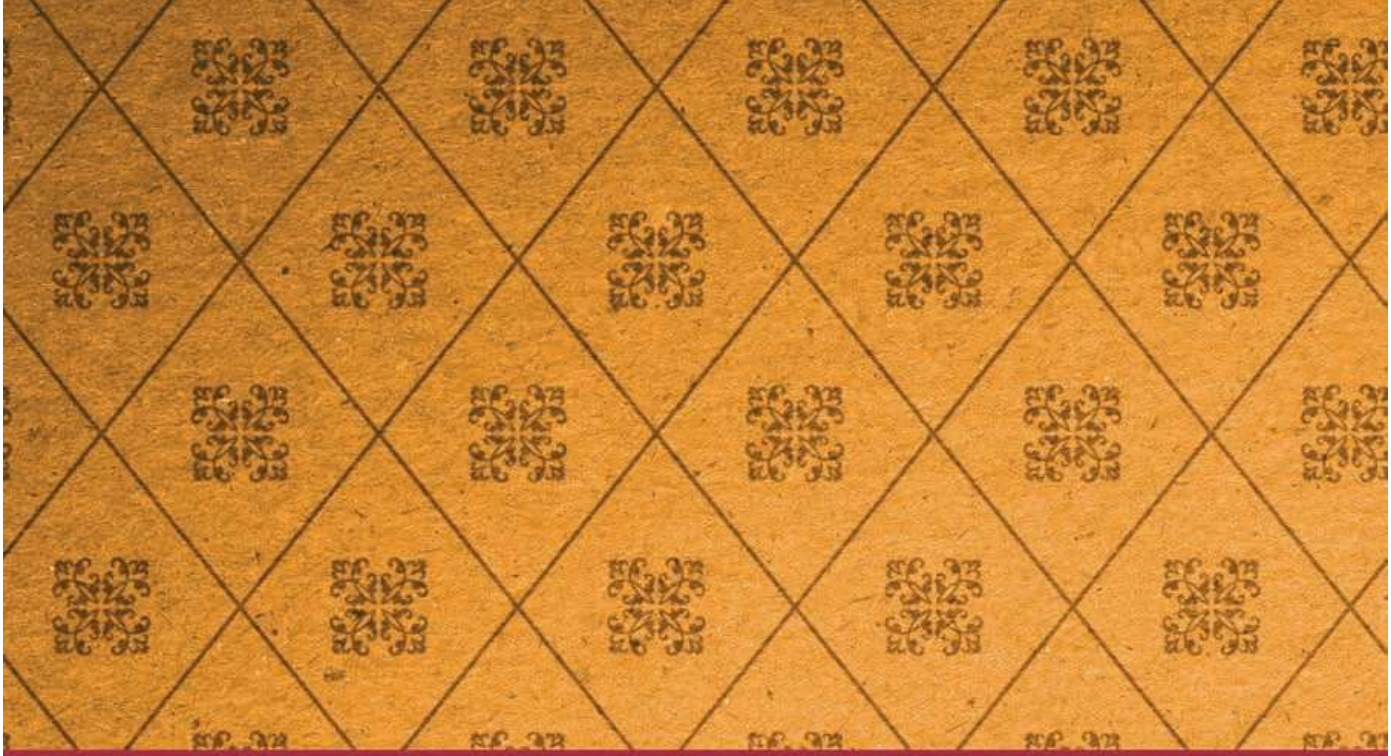
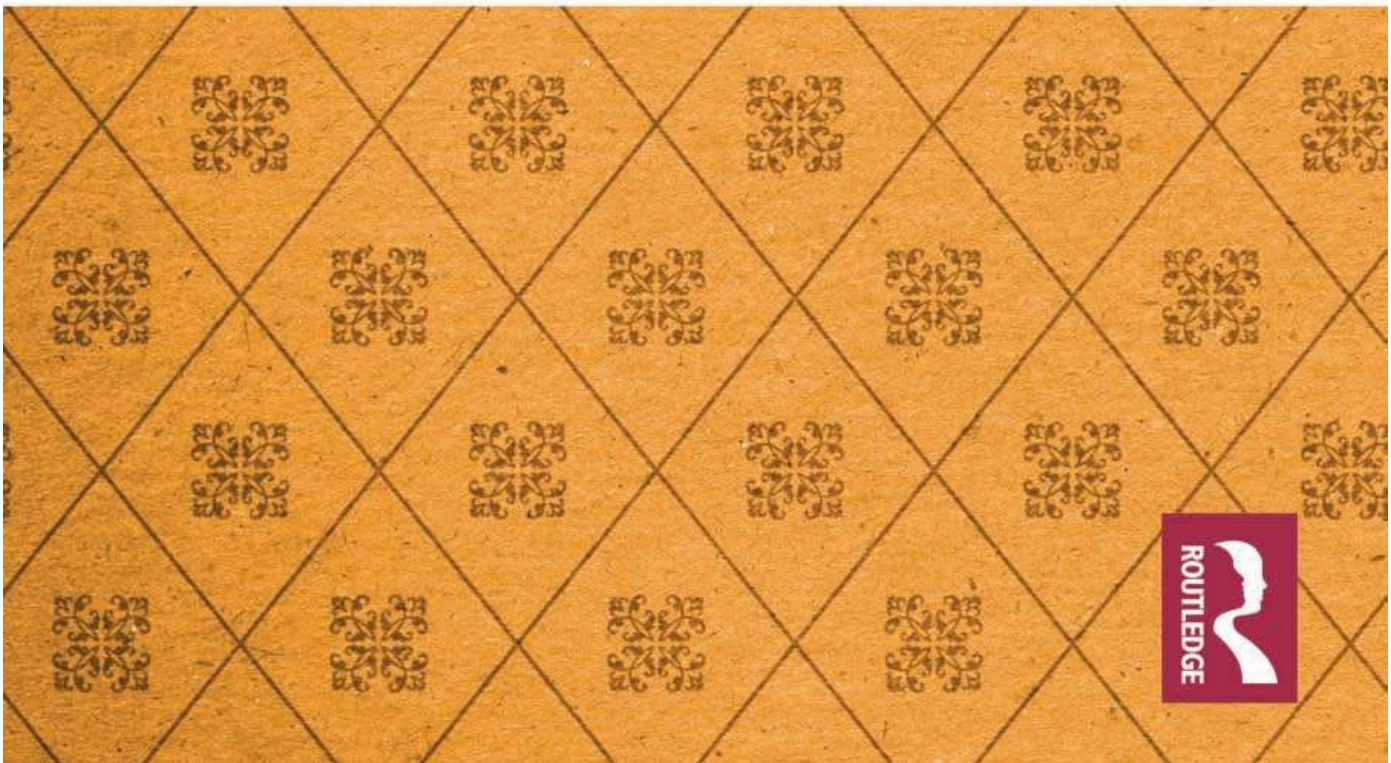


Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies

GREEK MYTH AND THE BIBLE

Bruce Louden



Greek Myth and the Bible

> This remarkable book undertakes to show that Greek myths were available to the writers of the Hebrew Bible and of the New Testament to serve both as models and as foils for their own religious purposes, just as John Milton adapted classical myths to make them fit Satan. Louden brings to light quite unexpected congruences from Homer to Euripides and shows repeatedly how old polytheistic stories could be reshaped as Biblical narratives about a single god, from Genesis to the Book of Revelation. Our picture of the complex dialog between Judaeo-Christian and pagan literature will never be quite the same.
>
> Richard Janko, *University of Michigan, USA*

Since the nineteenth-century rediscovery of the Gilgamesh epic, we have known that the Bible imports narratives from outside of Israelite culture, refiguring them for its own audience. Only more recently, however, has come the realization that Greek culture is also a prominent source of biblical narratives.

Greek Myth and the Bible argues that classical mythological literature and the biblical texts were composed in a dialogic relationship. Louden examines a variety of Greek myths from a range of sources, analyzing parallels between biblical episodes and Hesiod, Euripides, Argonautic myth, selections from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Homeric epic.

This fascinating volume offers a starting point for debate and discussion of these cultural and literary exchanges and adaptations in the wider Mediterranean world and will be an invaluable resource to students of the Hebrew Bible and the influence of Greek myth.

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Introduction

In Genesis 28, Jacob pauses on his quest to the east, making a stop for the night at a place that initially does not receive any individuating details. Using one of the stones there for a pillow, he falls asleep and dreams his famous, fateful dream. Waking the next day, he dedicates the stone, on which he had laid his head, to his God. Commentators tell us that the stone Jacob dedicates to Yahweh is a component of a preexisting Canaanite sanctuary, originally used, therefore, in service of a previous god.

Fox (2008: 294–95), in his discussion of the "Corcyrian Cave," notes how, according to ancient tradition, this is where part of Zeus' battle with Typhoeus took place. Inscriptions unearthed at nearby Corcyros refer to "Zeus of Victory," referencing the outcome of the struggle. Near the mouth of the cave stood a temple to Zeus. As Fox notes, Christians later built a Christian church on the site of this earlier temple to Zeus (295), "the temple of the cave was laboriously replaced with a Christian church, *which reused its stones and pillars* c AD 500" (italics mine).

Christians have built on and appropriated elements from earlier polytheistic religion in other ways as well. In a rather well-known instance, Christmas, entirely postbiblical and extrabiblical as it is, appropriates a preexisting festival for the birth of the Sun god. As Fox notes, until well into the fourth century CE we lack records of Christians celebrating the holiday on December 25 (1992: 28), "Not until the mid-fourth century AD are Christians known to have been celebrating Christmas on 25 December." Fox continues (1992: 36),

> Previously the date had marked a pagan festival, the birth of the sun god at the winter solstice. It was a deliberate retort by Christians in the western parts of the Roman Empire to choose the date as a festival of the birth of their new god, Christ.

Many more instances could be added to these few examples: transformational activities of this sort were common practice among early Christians, and were arguably typical at some stage in the development of all three monotheistic religions.

This book is concerned with how both Jews and Christians did similar things in their sacred narratives. They often built them on or from preexisting sacred narratives, reusing the foundations, stones and pillars, appropriating elements, components, and even lengthy narrative sequences, from earlier myths. The building blocks are put to new use, but are the older stones and foundations completely obscured or still partly visible? As foundations, do they not still exert some overarching architectonic influence? Take away the foundation completely and a structure collapses. There is a key difference, however, between reusing stones to fashion a new temple and reworking parts of older sacred narratives to fashion new ones: we still have many of the earlier myths in their entirety, not just a few episodes or passages here and there. Thus, we have not merely glimpses but their earlier totality and their often originally different meanings remain.

We have known that this is the case since the rediscovery of the *Gilgamesh* epic in the nineteenth century (with its earlier version of the Flood myth): some narratives in the Hebrew Bible originated outside of Israelite culture. But the Flood myth, in its dependence on non-Israelite myth, is not an isolated instance, but rather is indicative of intercultural relationships evident in much of the Bible. As Mark Smith notes, "It is commonly accepted that parts of Gen 1–11 show literary dependence, either directly or indirectly, on Mesopotamian literary tradition."[1] A brief, only partial, list of examples in the Hebrew Bible, for which scholars have found antecedents outside of Israel, includes:

- Babylonian acrostics and some parts of Psalms 25 and 119;
- Mesopotamian oracle collections and the prophetic books;
- the Babylonian *Adapa* and some of the traditional features of revelations in the Hebrew Bible;
- Babylonian wisdom texts in general;
- the traditional god list and hymns of praise;
- an Aramaic blessing and Psalm 20;
- the Babylonian *Theodicy* and Job;
- Deuteronomy's central rubric of the covenant, and Hittite and Neo-Assyrian treaty documents;
- possible Persian impetus for formation of the Pentateuch.[2]

While some of these interconnections are now widely known, far less known are the Hebrew Bible's interconnections with Greek culture. It is not only the dominant cultures to the East of Israel that provided narrative models and sources for many of the various stories that would come together as the Hebrew Bible. This study will argue that Israel's oral traditions and scribal culture were not only acquainted with but were also influenced and shaped by ancient Greek culture. For those who think the similarities we will trace could have gone into either direction, I suggest that if one considers how widespread the respective languages were, Greek and Hebrew, which language has earlier

documentation, which people enter the historical record first, which culture was a significant maritime power for over a millennium, and which established an empire including the other – if some form of diffusion, direct or indirect, accounts for correspondences between Greek and Hebrew narratives – the odds are far greater that the direction is from Greek to Israelite culture. I count myself, then, among those who regard the Bible as also responding to Greek culture, in addition to its engagement of Near Eastern cultural traditions.

I have argued elsewhere that the *Odyssey*, with its variety of settings and episodes, offered instances of several types of myth that proved germane to the interests of the scribal tradition behind the Hebrew bible. The recognition scenes in Joseph's myth (Gen 42–46), which are the same specific subtype of recognition found elsewhere only in the *Odyssey*, postponed recognition, are written in response to those in the *Odyssey*.[3] The Book of Jonah can be seen as a brief parodic version of key motifs from the *Odyssey*, those associated with "the fantastic voyage," and with the divine council between Zeus and Poseidon in Book 13.[4] The depictions of theoxeny in Genesis 18 and 19 have so many specific correspondences with those in the *Odyssey* that again it appears likely that they have been consulted as a rubric of sorts. Saul's consultation with the Witch of End-dor (1 Sam 28) has the same sequence of motifs as those the *Odyssey* present in Odysseus' encounter with Circe, and subsequent trip to the Underworld (Books 10–11). When Joshua sends two spies to consult Rahab in Jericho (Josh 2), the narrative follows the exact contours of Odysseus' disguised entrance into Troy and safe reception by Helen (4.242–58). When Jacob wrestles "the man" at the riverbank (Gen 32:22–32), the Hebrew Bible turns to a common genre of Greek myth, a hero wrestling a river god, but especially the subtype presented in *Odyssey* 4, when Menelaus wrestles the sea god Proteus and receives a blessing (4.351–586). Perhaps the most detailed correspondences of all are those between the crew's rebellion against Odysseus and desecration of Helios' cattle on Thrinakia in *Odyssey* 12 and Exodus 32.[5]

In this study, I pursue additional instances where episodes from the *Odyssey* prove apropos for the scribal tradition of the Hebrew Bible and for New Testament authors but include other Greek authors and texts as well. Hesiod's *Theogony*, I argue, is consulted by the Genesis scribes as they construct their primeval history, both immediately before and after their account of the Flood myth. Genesis' depiction of Noah's sons and grandsons adapts and refashions, in a classic instance of euhemerism, Hesiod's account of some of the Titans, Iapetos in particular. I will also demonstrate that episodes from the *Theogony* are consulted as a rubric for episodes in Revelation 4, 12, and 19–20.

I will argue that Argonautic myth is consulted as a rubric for many of the particulars of Genesis' account of Jacob. His heading east to win a wife, his labors to win her, which involve the use of magic, her own use of magic to conceive, and their flight from Laban during the night after she has stolen his household gods, all find close correspondences in Jason, Medea, Aietes,

The resulting order in this lengthy, well-known section of the *Theogony*, with Iapetos last, after Kronos, thus ends up corresponding to the usual sequence in Genesis of Ham, then Japheth. Is there a connection, then, in both myths having a prominent violation of their usual sequence for the sons? Genesis' Ham, as we will argue, corresponds in many ways to Hesiod's Kronos: each is the son who most directly challenges his primordial father. The correspondences will prove unexpectedly close.

In keeping with their primeval status, Iapetos and Japheth are both associated with, but not the central actors in, their respective versions of the Flood myth.[11] Iapetos is grandfather of Deukalion, the Greek character corresponding to Noah (and the earlier Utnapishtim). Pindar, at a fairly early date (roughly 470), knows a complete version of the myth (*Olympian* 9, 40–56), and makes prominent mention of Ἰαπετιονίδος φύτλας ("of Iapetos' race"). Japheth, as we have seen, is a son of Noah, and is on the Ark, a survivor of the Deluge.

Castration of the father

The only other event in which Japheth plays a role is the bizarre episode in Genesis 9:20–27 in which his brother Ham sees Noah's genitals, when their father is passed out, drunk, in his tent. The episode, in its present form, is enigmatic and resists attempts at convincing analysis and interpretation, other than the specific outcome: a curse placed on the Canaanites because Canaan is Ham's son. Here is Alter's translation (1996),

> [Noah] exposed himself within his tent. And Ham … saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. And Shem and Japheth took a cloak and put it over both their shoulders and walked backward and covered their father's nakedness, their faces turned backward so they did not see their father's nakedness. And Noah woke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him.

Noah then pronounces a curse, not on Ham but on Ham's son, Canaan, while bestowing blessings on Japheth and Shem.

Alter (40), noting some of the episode's notorious inconsistencies, connects the passage both with Hesiod and with the rather Hesiodic account of the race of heroes at Genesis 6:1–4,

> Like the story of the Nephilim, this episode alludes cryptically to narrative material that may have been familiar to the ancient audience but must have seemed to the monotheistic writer dangerous to spell out … Ham, the perpetrator of the act of violation, is mysteriously displaced in the curse by his son Canaan, and the whole story is made to justify the … subject status of the Canaanites in relation to the descendants of Shem … (Ham also figures now as the *youngest* son, not

> the middle one). No one has ever figured out what exactly it is that Ham does to Noah. Some commentators, as early as the classical Midrash, have glimpsed here a Zeus Chronos [*sic*] story in which the son castrates the father, or, alternately, penetrates him sexually … Lot's daughters, of course, take advantage of *his* drunkenness to have sex with him.

While Alter here confuses the generations involved in Hesiod's castration account, other scholars have nonetheless come to similar conclusions in their attempts to understand the episode and its aftermath.

From these and other inconsistencies, many commentators assume Genesis 9:20–27 is an abbreviated excerpt from a longer tale, which the authors of Genesis have altered and adapted to make the resultant version serve their own narrative purpose: providing an etiology for a curse on the Canaanites. Independent of any possible correspondence with the *Theogony*, the *Talmud* (b. Sanhedrin 70a) suggests that Ham originally committed a much greater offence, as Alter hints that he castrated Noah or sexually abused him (partly based on parallels between the phrase "and he saw," which at Gen 34:2 is used of Shechem violating Dinah). Shinan and Zakovitch (2012: 132) note that Noah's reaction, again in Alter's rendering, "knew what his youngest son had done to him" is "a bit strong for referring to the consequences of merely being 'seen.'"

In Hesiod, of course, Iapetos' youngest brother Kronos *does* castrate his father Ouranos (*Theogony* 159–210), while Iapetos has also committed unspecified offences for which he is punished in Tartaros (*Iliad* 8.478–81). Chantraine (453) derives the name from ἰάπτω, "lancer, atteindre, blesser, lacérer … Seul terme apparenté Ἰαπετος 'celui qui est projeté.'" If Chantraine is correct, Iapetos' very name alludes to his punishment (somewhat as does Pentheus), as in Hesiod's use of the verb ἰάπτω at *Catalogue of Women*, frag. 204.118: πολλὰς Ἀΐδηι κεφαλὰς ἀπὸ χαλκὸν ἰάψειν, and in the *Iliad*'s proem, πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν (1.3).

When Noah wakens, "And Noah woke from his wine and he knew what his youngest son had done to him," he places the curse not on Ham, now the youngest son, but on Ham's son Canaan. This leads Speiser to wonder (62), "Have two divergent traditions been fused?"[12] In the *Theogony*, Kronos, who castrates his father Ouranos, *is* the youngest of his brothers. But Iapetos, as we have seen, is also associated with some unstipulated kind of wrongdoing, and of the four sons he and his wife Klymene produce, three of them are also subject to severe punishment: Atlas, Menoitios (who seems most like Ham: *Theog*. 514–16: ὑβριστὴν … ἀτασθαλίης τε καὶ ἠνορέης ὑπερόπλου), and more famously, Prometheus, whom Hesiod refers to eight times as "Son of Iapetos."

Ion and Javan

Japheth's other main function, as is also true of Shem and Ham, is to be the father of several sons. It is at this point that Genesis most explicitly

demonstrates awareness of Greek myth. In the Table of Nations that immediately follows the incident in Noah's tent, Genesis list Japheth's four sons as Gomer, Magog, Madai, and Javan (Gen 10:2, 4). As noted, Javan is the same eponym as the Greek Ion (from *Ἰαϝων).[13] The name has widespread, international circulation from very early times. Chantraine cites a Mycenaean form: "*iawone*." It is in the *Iliad*, Ἰάονες, 13.685, as Brown notes (82), and was also current in ancient India, found frequently, as Yavanas, in the *Mahabhârata*. Speiser, noting the larger parallels and overlap between the names Japheth and Iapetos, concludes (65), "It is significant, therefore, that the descendants of Japheth include the Ionians."

Javan, in turn, has four sons (Gen 10:4): Elishash, Tarshish, Kittim, and Rodanim. Genesis continues, as explanation (10:5), "From these the peoples of the coasts and islands separated into their own countries."[14] Speiser (66) explains that Elishah corresponds to Alashiya, another name for Cyprus, Kittim corresponds to Kition, a Greek city also on Cyprus, while Rodanim clearly designates the inhabitants of Rhodes. According to Euripides, and larger Greek traditions,[15] Ion also has four sons. Athena explains near the end of Euripides' play (1575–78), "For, from him four sons, born from one root, will bequeath their names to the land, and the people by tribe."[16] Ion is a few generations from Iapetos (Prometheus: Deukalion: Hellen: Xouthos: I on), according to Apollodorus.

Noah's divine attributes

Let us now consider these passages from some other perspectives, placing them in revealing contexts. In several particulars, Noah, in the episodes following the actual Flood narrative, acts, or is depicted, in ways more reminiscent of a divine character than a mortal. It is worth emphasizing that these episodes do not express any particular continuity with the larger Flood narrative, which supports the possibility of their having been originally independent narratives, now used as transitioning elements. In the episode that serves as prelude to the mysterious events in the tent, Genesis credits Noah with inventing viticulture (9:20, and perhaps suggested earlier at 5:29). On the one hand, the focus on wine seems generally surprising, given its far less central place in Israelite culture than Greek.[17] On the other hand, this is the type of accomplishment that in Greek myth would be credited to a god. Psalm 80:8–9, as J. P. Brown argues (135), depicts Yahweh as a vintner, "The God of Israel brought Israel as a vine out of Egypt and planted it,"[18] showing that a similar association could hold in Israelite culture. Genesis 9, in contrast, does not say Yahweh showed or taught Noah but instead presents Noah as the primary agent.

Genesis credits Noah with a supernatural life span. He is said to be 500 years old when he fathers Shem, Ham, and Japheth (5:32). His own father Lamech lived to be 777 (5:31); Noah is 600, the three sons apparently 100, when the Deluge comes (7:6).