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Story of Joseph

Hans J. L. Jensen

Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture, Issue 14, 2007, pp.  
39-57 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctn.2008.0003>



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# The Bible Is (Also) a Myth

## Lévi-Strauss, Girard, and the Story of Joseph

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Hans J. L. Jensen

*University of Aarhus, Denmark*

**T**his article consists of three parts: (1) some preliminary remarks explaining the background to the following reflections; (2) a series of theses; and (3) the article proper, “The Bible Is (Also) a Myth.”

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS

As is well known, René Girard’s mimetic theory has such close connections to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism and such deep-rooted differences from it that one may be tempted to regard it as a probably inevitable instance of mimetic rivalry. Both authors have taken great interest in myths. But while according to Lévi-Strauss (at least in certain passages), myth as a statement about the world is basically empty, to Girard it is basically lying.<sup>1</sup> Specific investigations of myths and other religious themes in Girard’s work primarily serve a greater project, a general model for the origin and development of culture. Yet specific studies of individual texts have an undeniable force of

their own: Girard's analysis of the book of Job, for instance,<sup>2</sup> is a masterful tour de force, the value of which is related as much to its immediate object, the biblical book, as to the larger theoretical perspective of which it is a part. In Lévi-Strauss's work, it is the other way around: here it is mostly the individual text studies that matter; references to a possible "origin" or to a general theory of, for example, the "human mind," or the like, have a much lesser degree of importance. Yet, despite the different categorical levels on which the two theorists situate themselves, they meet in the analysis of texts; Girard's polemic against Lévi-Strauss's readings of myths is not only a general one but also refers to the understanding of specific myths.<sup>3</sup>

Girardian hermeneutics (or mimetic theory) is very effective in my own area of research, Hebrew Bible studies. I am convinced that a considerable number of specific texts and problems in the Hebrew Bible can be interpreted conclusively by assuming viewpoints inspired by mimetic theory.<sup>4</sup> Yet other problems probably cannot be solved, or can be interpreted only by reducing them to gross categories that do not do justice to their inner thematic (for example, Hebrew sacrificial practice). The interpretation of these *other* dimensions, texts, and problematics can be furthered in important ways, I believe, by assuming a classical structuralist viewpoint (which so far has been done only on a minor scale in Hebrew Bible studies). The level of abstraction pursued in this article is not the overall generative theory but the understanding of texts.

The direct inspiration for the present article is two of Girard's analyses: the confrontation of the Oedipus myth with the Joseph story<sup>5</sup> and the analysis of a Venda myth.<sup>6</sup> In the last-mentioned case, Girard shows how a myth taken from Luc de Heusch's book *Le Roi ivre*<sup>7</sup>—which in de Heusch's context served as an example of a vast intercultural network of myths dealing with the origin of human reality—is a poorly disguised instance of witch hunting. Girard's demonstration is convincing, but I don't think de Heusch's own endeavor has been shattered thereby. De Heusch wanted to describe Bantu mythology as a complex but coherent way of understanding the world. This understanding *may* ultimately be based on scapegoating, but it is still interesting to study it as a mythological network. As a mythological system, it may still have theological implications, not only negatively, as an example of *méconnaissance*, but also positively. Mythologies belong to the riches of the world, and the riches of the world are a respectable theological subject.

Following Michel Serres's important book, *The Natural Contract*,<sup>8</sup> one can imagine a possible reconciliation between the science of religion of the nineteenth century and more modern variants. In the nineteenth century, religion

was often explained in terms of natural phenomena (sun, storm, fertility); humankind feared nature and therefore tried to master it by means of magic and religion. Since Durkheim (the Girardian conception of religion belongs to this general trend), religion has rather been understood in terms of society; by means of religion, society is kept stable. Perhaps this change took place at the same time that industrial development made nature less harmful to human beings (or seemed to do so)? To Serres, it is rather the human world that has become harmful to nature.

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The bulk of this article will consist of a structural-transformational analysis of American and biblical myths. The purpose will be to soften the strict opposition between biblical narratives and myths implied in the statement that “the Bible is not a myth.” I shall argue that even if the Bible is not a myth, there are myths in the Bible. I shall further argue that myths deal not only with relations between persons (as in mimetic relationships) but also with relations between human beings and nature. The relation to nature is implicitly present in Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of myth; it is explicitly stated in Michel Serres’s proposal for a “natural contract.” Before the analysis proper, I open with some more general theses about the broader context in which I situate the problem with Bible and myth.

## THESES

### *Thesis 1: Anthropology and Theology*

Lévi-Straussian theory is anthropologically incomplete: it does not see to what extent scapegoating generates its most basic themes; this gap can be filled in by Girardian theory. Girardian theory is theologically incomplete:<sup>9</sup> it concentrates on the relationship between human beings. This is a necessary but not a sufficient part of a theology; it has little to say about the relationship between human beings and nature; this gap can, perhaps, be filled in partly by Lévi-Straussian anthropology.

### *Thesis 2: Humans and Nature*

Myths speak about social relations, and social relations *may* be based on or disguise scapegoating; but myths also speak about nature, and nature is not

based on scapegoating. A theory of myth should be interested in every aspect of myth. Since nature is one of myth's main concerns, a theory of myth (that is, a strategy of reading of myths) that does not take this interest seriously is not a sufficient theory (or strategy).

*Thesis 3: Human Beings Live Not Only  
by God's Word, but Also by Bread*

Blessing in the Hebrew Bible is basically two sided: it includes freedom (from other persons' aggression, persecution, and so forth) *and* the availability of a means of living; of these, the last-mentioned factor is the most important (see Gen. 27:28f; Lev. 26:4ff; Deut. 28:3ff). One may be able to live in spite of political suppression, persecution, and violence, provided one has bread; but one cannot live with freedom from violence and no bread.

*Thesis 4: Bread Does Not Come Only from Consent and Peace  
between Human Beings, but Also and Primarily from the Earth*

It is correct that a society fragmented by internal rivalries cannot provide bread. The ultimate condition for producing bread, however, does not stem from the scapegoat mechanism or from other any human activity eventually generated from scapegoating (as agriculture may be, according to Girard), but from nature itself, from earth, rain, light, microbes, chemical reactions, and so forth. This is not necessarily a trivial point; religions normally regard it as very important (see, for example, the Hebrew Bible). Human beings can destroy the balance between these conditions; they can describe them and even imitate them; but they cannot invent them. Technology can never take over from nature: technology presupposes earth and sun, but earth and sun do not presuppose technology. Sun and earth existed before human beings and will exist after them. Many religions regard sun and earth as gods; these beliefs are not necessarily naive or trivial. Myths have a deep interest in sun, moon, wind, fog, rocks, animals, plants. In theological terms, these realities belong to creation theology in a broad sense; religions speak about them incessantly (see Ps. 104).

*Thesis 5: Lévi-Straussian Analysis of Myth Teaches  
the Reader about the External World*

In his studies of myth, Lévi-Strauss no doubt regards nature primarily as a category for the human mind. Myths do not talk about animals because of the animals as such but because they can be used to signify something else. Nature is a treasure trove for code building. But it is not possible to decode these codes without a primary knowledge of their constituent parts, as they were understood before they were used as codes; one cannot know what a lynx, a loon, a porcupine, or a jaguar signifies without knowing what a lynx or other animal is. Lévi-Strauss's books have pictures, especially of animals. Within the realm of mimetic theory, is it possible to make books with beautiful pictures of animals?

*Thesis 6: Salvation from Metaphysical Desire Leads to Real Life*

Girard demonstrates the logic of metaphysical desire; he also points to the possibility of escaping it (like the novelistic heroes' deathbed conversions). What is waiting after the escape? In (Christian) Old Testament theology, salvation is regarded as a key concept; but salvation in the Hebrew Bible—typically expressed by the verbs *hitstil* and *hoshia*—is a dynamic movement, not a state of being, something that happens, not something that is or lasts. In the Hebrew Bible, salvation is not important in itself but because it restores the possibility of a real life; real life is “blessing,” *berakah* in Hebrew, or “peace,” *shalom* in Hebrew.<sup>10</sup> In Girard, “bad mimesis” can be turned into “good mimesis”: through imitation of Christ one can learn to transform one's rival into one's neighbor. But because today the world cannot be restricted to the local world, today, personally and locally, “neighbor” must include everybody, not only the persons closest to oneself; and today, love of the earth must be not only love of one's own earth (*Vater-land*), but also love of the globe, soil and all (*Mother Earth*).<sup>11</sup>

THE BIBLE IS (ALSO) A MYTH

*The Mythological System of Fog and Wind and of the Bird-Nester*

In connection with the following reflections, a summary of a main line of argumentation in Lévi-Strauss's dense and rewarding book, *The Story of Lynx*

(1995), will probably be useful. The structural study of myth is essentially comparative and therefore often demands a considerable number of narratives and variants.

#### THE STORY OF LYNX

In the Nez Percé story about Lynx, Lynx is a repulsive old man with an itchy skin. By means of magic, a young girl gets pregnant, Lynx being the father. Scandalized, the inhabitants of the village leave the couple and their child. Lynx takes a sweat bath and changes his appearance to that of his real self, a handsome young man. Lynx is a very successful hunter; he creates a fog that makes hunting impossible for everybody else, so that they all starve. The villagers learn about Lynx's abundance of food and return to the village. Lynx receives them amicably and assures them that in the future no fog will hinder their hunting. He becomes their chief.<sup>12</sup>

#### LYNX, COYOTE, AND THE BOY WHO CAUGHT THE WIND

The Lynx myth belongs to a larger group of myths, typical of the cultures of the northwestern part of North America (the states of Washington, Idaho, and Wyoming, and British Columbia); this group is centered on the fog and the wind. Lynx is the master of fog. His story can be embedded in a longer narrative that has Coyote as its protagonist; Coyote, who plays a minor role in the Lynx myth, is the master of cold weather. He is the one who takes the initiative when the villagers punish Lynx and leave him. He helps his own son in an attempt to marry the daughter of a cannibal sorcerer.<sup>13</sup>



Part of this longer myth can be embedded in an even longer myth that deals with the origin of *dentalia*, shells much appreciated as jewelry and as magical instruments. In a syncretical version that gives a cross section of the different versions, the main sequences (which can be independent narratives) of this myth are as follows. Two girls spy on their father or brother while he is producing *dentalia* as part of a secret initiation ceremony. The girls are

separated from their family; they marry Coyote and Lynx, respectively. The son of Lynx is stolen by Owl; the son of Lynx escapes, takes a bath, and changes into Diver, the master of *dentalia*. He returns from the lake with a repulsive skin (like that of Lynx). The skin is burned and creates a fog; the young man returns to his true, handsome self, as a great hunter.<sup>14</sup>

The hero of the last-mentioned myth, the boy stolen by Owl, can be called Snánaz or other, similar names; it has a relationship to Owl and/or to a small mantle. As a young man he is a double of Lynx, creator of fog by means of his skin.<sup>15</sup> In another group of myths, a boy called Snánaz captures the wind in his mantle and will not set the wind free until it has promised not to plague mankind in the future. This boy also steals the daughter of a big chief, with help from Coyote. The boy's brothers covet his wife and throw him downward, over a precipice onto a rock. Coyote helps the boy up from his prison; the boy regains his wife, whom his father has protected from his two brothers. After these events the boy is regarded as a powerful sorcerer.<sup>16</sup>

This story is an inversion of the story of Lynx: fog and wind are opposites; the hero is connected with a skin or a mantle, which produces fog or catches wind; and a coyote is the one who takes the initiative.

#### THE BIRD-NESTER AND ONE MYTH ONLY

The myths about fog and wind constitute a group of their own; for practical reasons, this group had to be left out of Lévi-Strauss's main work, the four volumes of the *Mythologies*.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the group is related to the core of Lévi-Strauss's magisterial investigation of South American and North American myths.

The *Mythologies* are built up around a "referential myth," the story of the Bird-Nester—a boy who is left on a rock or in the top of a tree, after a conflict with a father or an elder brother-in-law. In its purest form, this myth is concentrated in central Brazil (among the Gê and Bororo tribes) and in the northwestern part of North America to which the myths about the fog and the wind also belong. In the South American versions,<sup>18</sup> animals (such as Gê, a jaguar, earthly representative of the sun and master of kitchen fire) help the boy down and he becomes the bringer of fire to humankind. In the North American versions he is typically the master of precious garments; he is married and his stepfather, Coyote, who desires his wives, leaves him helpless in a tree or on a rock and makes his wives believe that he is dead.<sup>19</sup> In North America, as in South America, the myth is related to the origin of fire.<sup>20</sup>

On the one hand, to Lévi-Strauss there is no such thing as an "arch-myth"; all myths are transformations of other myths, and all codes of a myth can be



translated into other codes in the same myth or in other myths; there is no last myth or last code bearing the “real message” behind all the other versions and codes.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the myth of the Bird-Nester does assume a kind of archetypal status at the end of the *Mythologies*; in Lévi-Strauss’s treatment it becomes *the* myth of native, pre-state American culture, the one myth that, through all its versions and transformations, tells the story of the origin of the real world as a separation of culture from nature. The fundamental event in this myth is the irreparable rupture between heaven and earth; this, however, leaves the kitchen fire (which comes from the sun in heaven) on earth, both as a token of an original continuity between heaven and earth and as a means of keeping heaven and earth at a distance, neither too close (otherwise, earth would be scorched or burned by heavenly fire) nor too far away (otherwise, earth would be dark, humid, or cold).<sup>22</sup>

Despite Lévi-Strauss’s often-repeated assurances that there is no hidden unity or nuclear message behind the multiplicity of myths, codes, and transformations, such a unity does seem to exist. It is not without good reason that the last chapter in the analysis of American myths in *The Naked Man* is called “Le mythe unique” (One Myth Only).<sup>23</sup> Lévi-Strauss does not ask, however, whether this “mythe unique” is related to myths in other parts of the world, on other continents—either as an identical scheme that generates similar variations or in a more or less transformed version.<sup>24</sup> In any event, surprisingly enough, all the comparative analyses end up with an “arch-myth” of a kind, related to an “arch-event”: if the “mythe unique” correlates to any real event, it must be the real conquest of fire. If there is a moment, according to Lévi-Strauss, where culture departs from nature, this should be it.<sup>25</sup>



The story of the boy who caught the wind is a transformation of the Bird-Nester myth. In both myths the hero is isolated on a rock: in the Bird-Nester myth in an upward direction (and in the North American versions the rock or tree magically grows, in some of the versions, up into heaven) and in the wind myth downward;<sup>26</sup> in both cases, close relatives are the agents of this isolation—a jealous father or jealous brothers; in the North American version of the Bird-Nester myth, Coyote is the agent of the isolation, but in the wind myth he rescues the hero.<sup>27</sup>

It is not possible here to detail the many ways in which the myths in the group about wind and fog are interrelated with the Bird-Nester myths. Suffice it to say that the myths about Lynx, Coyote, and *dentalia*, as well as the wind

myth, taken together form a subgroup that is part of a much larger system, at the center of which is the Bird-Nester myth.

*Lynx, Oedipus; Bird-Nester, Joseph*

LYNX, WITCHCRAFT, OEDIPUS

There can be little doubt that all these myths, directly or indirectly, are also about something else. Lévi-Strauss does not deal with it in any detail, but it is almost always present. This ubiquitous factor is witchcraft.

Lynx is a sorcerer: he hides in a skin that is not his real skin; by means of a magical rite he can change his appearance; his hunting ability is caused by magic; and he causes a general hunger by magically calling forth a fog. Coyote is a powerful sorcerer.<sup>28</sup> The boy/young man who is the master of *dentalia* is a powerful magician.<sup>29</sup> The boy who catches the wind is a powerful magician.<sup>30</sup>

Sorcery and witchcraft permeate these stories. Lynx is lynched by all the villagers and barely saves his life.<sup>31</sup> This can be related to the burning of the young man's skin in the Lynx myth. Noteworthy also is a detail in the Coyote stories: Coyote declares that if his child (with one of the sisters who spied on their father or brother while he was producing *dentalia*) is a boy (or a girl) he will kill it; this is a widespread motif, the background of which, according to Lévi-Strauss, is the father's fear that his son might be his rival.<sup>32</sup>

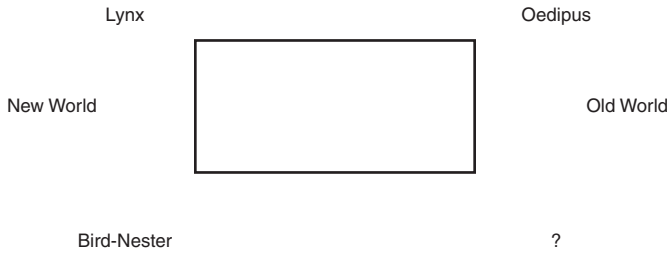
It is difficult not to compare the last-mentioned motif with the Oedipus myth. But in fact the whole Lynx myth seems to be a sort of Oedipus myth in reverse. In the Oedipus myth, a young man becomes old; he comes to a city and becomes a king, he secures a collective blessing, and he commits a sexual crime (he has killed his father, to be sure); and a plague devastates the city until Oedipus leaves it (followed only by his daughter). In the Lynx myth, an old man becomes young; a young girl becomes pregnant because of him; with his wife and child he is abandoned while the rest of the villagers leave the village; Lynx creates hunger; and the villagers return, receive food, and make him their chief.<sup>33</sup>

That the Oedipus myth is a scapegoating tale is among the most ingenious results of Girard's readings.<sup>34</sup> The Lynx myth and the whole system of myth to which it belongs might be decoded in the same manner. Probably these myths belong to societies that firmly believe in witchcraft and—consequently—in scapegoating.<sup>35</sup>

Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that the Lynx myths and the rest of the system are related to the Bird-Nester myths. One can assume that the Lynx myths

also are based on witchcraft (and scapegoating). This hypothesis cannot be explored here; it is intriguing, however, that the very first myth in the last volume of the *Mythologies*, *The Naked Man*, is about a child (the future Bird-Nester) who is saved from a stake where a witch has been burned.<sup>36</sup>

At this point, the outline of a possible mythic system begins to materialize. On the one hand, the Lynx myth is related to the Bird-Nester myth; on the other hand, the Lynx myth is an inversion of the Oedipus myth.



If we follow Lévi-Strauss's own method it should be possible, at this point, to *deduce*, hypothetically, the existence of a fourth myth, which is related to the Oedipus myth as the Bird-Nester myth is related to the Lynx myth; this postulated myth must come from the same cultural area as the Oedipus myth.

Certainly, many myths and other narratives can, in one way or another, be regarded as transformations of the Oedipus myth. One of those is the Joseph story, as Girard has demonstrated. The task here, therefore, is only to show that the Joseph story relates to the Oedipus myth as the Bird-Nester myth relates to the Lynx myth; if this is the case, the Joseph story may also, somehow, relate to the Bird-Nester myth.

#### JAGUAR, POTIPHAR

Basically, the Bird-Nester myth is a story about a boy or a young man who is abandoned by his father or his older brother-in-law on a cliff or in a tree from which he cannot descend. An animal (or several animals) help(s) him down; he becomes the bringer of culture. In the South American versions he is especially connected with the kitchen fire, the central phenomenon that transforms nature (food) into culture (by means of cooking). In the North American versions he is especially connected with clothes. According to Lévi-Strauss, food and clothes are related as the internal to the external (the food in the body, the body in the clothes). Animals do not use fire to cook their food,

nor do they use clothes; both elements are strong symbols of the difference between nature and culture.<sup>37</sup>

Certain elements in the Joseph story have a strange similarity to the Bird-Nester myths.<sup>38</sup> Joseph is a master of beautiful clothes. Close male relatives—his brothers—envy him. They strip him of his robe and leave him helpless in a dry cistern;<sup>39</sup> he is left for dead. Strangers, who happen to pass by, rescue him. He is accepted in a stranger's house (just as the Gê hero is accepted in the jaguar's house) and treated with respect by the house's owner, but the owner's wife meets him with aggression (just as the jaguar's wife harasses the Gê hero). Joseph becomes the master of bread, able to secure the survival of his family.

Some of these coincidences are only visible as the results of transformations. While the South American Bird-Nester leaves his host in order to bring fire (and thereby the origin of culture) to his people, Joseph brings his people to his place in a foreign country, thereby securing their lives (and by implication their culture).<sup>40</sup> While the North American Bird-Nester is typically persecuted by his father, Joseph is persecuted by his brothers.

The most interesting instance of such a transformation is the episode with Potiphar's wife. In the North American version of the Bird-Nester myth, the envious father persecutes his son because he wants to seduce the son's wives. In the Joseph narrative, the wife of the hero's master (a metaphorical father) wants to seduce the hero. Moreover, in North America there exists a group of narratives, regarded by Lévi-Strauss as a transformation of the Bird-Nester myth, in which the hero is the victim of a father's or elder brother's wife's sexual desires. The chaste hero rejects her importunity; in anger she accuses him of attempting to seduce her, and the hero is forced to flee the father's or brother's rage, thereby ending up in a tree. Lévi-Strauss calls this version the "Potiphar transformation."<sup>41</sup>

These elements of the Joseph story are all on the most concrete level of the narrative. They are especially interesting here, because they, or many of them, have no place in the transformational scheme that exists between the story and the Oedipus myth: the clothes, the bread, the cistern, the isolation in a downward direction—all these have no relevance for the relationship to the Oedipus myth, but they are all part of the traits that relate the Joseph story to the Bird-Nester myth.

#### LEGITIMATE "PAGANISM"?

To Girard, the Joseph story does not justify persecution. The hero is innocent and his accusers are wrong; it is a story not about divine justice fulfilled but

about reconciliation and the persecutors' conversion. I have no objections to this analysis.<sup>42</sup> Girard reaches the theme of the story through a structural comparison with the Oedipus myth; and it is in order to demonstrate the categorical differences between the stories that he analyzes them as transformations. I have no objections to this either.

Probably, within the realm of mimetic theory, a transformational relationship that is "only" a transformation, with no categorical leap from an (implicit and/or "innocent") acceptance of scapegoating, as in the Oedipus myth, to its rejection, as in the Joseph story, would be considered trivial or at best a transformational relationship of a much less interesting kind than the one that exists between the Greek myth and the biblical story. But as far as I can see, it is interesting and important to notice not only the way in which biblical stories differ from other cultures' stories but also the way in which they do not; and it is equally interesting to note how nonbiblical cultures may be interrelated. The similarities and continuities between biblical myths (and other sorts of narratives, as well as rituals, by the way) and other myths (and so forth) should not be made light of; neither should they be explained away as embarrassing relics of a "pagan" past. The Bible (and later religions based on the Bible) represents not only a break with other cultures but also continuity.

Cultures, languages, and religions are all different, but they are never totally different; there are always certain phenomena, on different levels of abstraction (schemes, structures, motifs), that connect them. One of the reasons for this may be that the perpetual tendency to cultural differentiation is counteracted by the irreparable identity of the human body.<sup>43</sup>

However that may be, to Girard the relevant thing about the Joseph story is that it is an inversion of the Oedipus myth. But it is equally interesting that by being this it also becomes a transformed version of a pan-American myth. It shows that Claus Westermann was right when he, one of very few among Hebrew Bible scholars, insisted on the objective continuity between the myths of Genesis and universal folklore.<sup>44</sup>

The Joseph story is about reconciliation between brothers, but it is also about survival. Joseph is the provider of bread. The brothers and the rest of Joseph's father's household seek him because he holds the keys to Egypt's stores of grain. The Hebrew Bible never loses sight of the material basis of existence. Its ideal is to "live under the vine." It does not look forward to an ethereal existence in Heaven or elsewhere where there is no question of food. Blessing in the Hebrew Bible can mean several things, but first and foremost it means an abundance of food. Texts in the Hebrew Bible can look forward

to new realities, to a new covenant, to a new temple, to a universal reconciliation; but all these new and good things will happen on this earth, to people who are born, live, give birth to children, age, and die.

People in the Western world have an abundance of food—probably one of the reasons why we don't value it and why those of us who work with theological matters tend to look down upon the pagans, for whom food was the most important thing in religion. As a story of reconciliation, the Joseph story can make a great impression on us, but it also remains a story of bread, of providing the necessary conditions for the continuation of physical life. Can the Joseph story, which tells us about reconciliation, also be an inspiration for reconciliation (at least in terms of a theory of religion) between those for whom religion is primarily about human beings and those for whom it is primarily about the nonhuman world? Can there be reconciliation between those for whom religion is primarily about reconciliation, and those for whom it is primarily about bread?

The Bird-Nester myth, with a structural scheme that it holds in common with the Joseph story, may well be generated from scapegoating. But it is also generated from other concerns. It is a cultural product, of course. But it deals with realities that are not generated from culture: it deals with heaven and earth, with fire, with cliffs and trees, with animals (jaguar, coyote, eagle, and others) and with the human body; the hero is almost starving, or freezing, to death. The way in which the myth deals with these facts is certainly mythical and thereby cultural; but the facts themselves are not cultural. Culture can provide food and clothes; but it has not created the fact that the body gets hungry if it does not get food, or gets cold if it does not have coverings.

### *Bethel, Babel, and the Bird-Nester*

The Hebrew Bible understands food and clothes neither as base material things, unworthy of theological interest, nor as trivialities, irrelevant to any theological consideration.

In the story of Jacob in Bethel (Gen. 28), Jacob sees an unexpected ladder between heaven and earth. He makes the place of this normally invisible connection into a sacred place; and he makes the vow that if Yahweh will provide him with food to eat and clothes to wear and will let him return safely from his journey (to obtain a wife) he will consider Yahweh his God and he will pay a tithe of everything (Gen. 28:20–22)—that is, he will pay to maintain Bethel as a holy place.

Jacob's theology may not be impressive in terms of subtlety, according to more contemporary theological standards. To Jacob, the relationship to God does not mean belief, or existential necessity; it means the attainment of material things of the most basic and trivial nature: food, clothes, and survival. Jacob believes that these things do not come from themselves or from him. In Jacob's view, they come from a source outside this world but connected with this world, because there is a ladder between the other reality and this world and he has seen it. Food, clothes, and survival are gifts from God. Here, Jacob is a pagan.

Like the Joseph story, the Jacob-in-Bethel story is not unlike the Bird-Nester myth. The South American versions of the Bird-Nester myth center on food, while the North American versions center on clothes; Genesis 28 and Lévi-Strauss agree that these two things are mirror images of each other.

In the Bird-Nester myth, fire is a token of a former, direct connection between heaven and earth, which no longer exists and also, at the same time, is a guarantee that heaven and earth will maintain their correct distance. This idea of "la bonne distance" is not unknown to the Hebrew Bible. Genesis 28 tells that at one spot a connection exists between heaven and earth—but also that this connection is normally invisible. Genesis 28 is a transformation of the Babel myth (Gen. 11). According to this myth, mankind was not able to establish a connection between earth and heaven, and the unfinished tower at Babel is the visible sign of their failure. The Bird-Nester myth, however, is found in some very strong versions in northwestern North America, where it, or its transformed version, the "Star Husband Tale,"<sup>45</sup> is included in a myth about a war between heaven and earth. The earthlings create a ladder of arrows in order to ascend to heaven. But when they try to escape a counterattack by the inhabitants of heaven, the ladder breaks; since then, heaven and earth have been disconnected.<sup>46</sup>

The Bethel story, as a transformation of the Babel myth, explains that such a connection does exist, made not by man but by God, not as a visible failure but as an invisible reality, not in Babel but in Bethel. And this connection is the source of blessing. In the Hebrew Bible it is not necessarily heaven and earth that should be kept at a correct distance; but the feeling of a necessary distance between the transcendent origin of culture and culture itself is very vivid. The "transcendent origin" is Yahweh, who is heavenly. In Bethel he has descended to earth. Jacob reacts as every Hebrew character would do. He is afraid, and he does not want to stay; after having declared the place as a holy place, he leaves.

The Bethel story is a myth; the Hebrew Bible is full of such myths. These myths are not identical with other cultures' myths, but neither are they totally different. These connections and similarities are an argument not against but for the Hebrew Bible's humanity, relevance, and actuality.

## NOTES

1. In *Les origines de la culture: Entretiens avec Pierpaolo Antonello et João Cezar de Casto Rocha* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2004), Girard argues that the only important point in myths is the fact that they conceal scapegoating (110); he also argues that "l'esprit mythique" is (justly) represented in the Bible as a source of mendacity and injustice (119). The fact that myths do not represent the victim as innocent is the only essential thing about myths.
2. Rene Girard, *Job, the Victim of His People* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987).
3. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), 105–25.
4. James Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); Hans J. L. Jensen, "Desire, Rivalry and Collective Violence in the 'Succession Narrative,'" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55: 39–59.
5. Girard, "The Bible Is Not a Myth," *Literature and Belief* 4 (1985): 7–15, repeated in Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront . . . Entretiens avec Michel Treguer* (Paris: Arléa, 1994), 50–52; Girard, *Les origines de la culture*, 109–113.
6. Girard, "A Venda Myth Analyzed" (paper presented at the Colloquium on Violence and Religion meeting at Stanford, CA, 1991); published in Richard J. Golsan, *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (New York and London: Garland, 1993), 151–79.
7. Luc de Heusch, *Le Roi ivre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). This work is a structural-comparative analysis of a number of Bantu myths, in the style of Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologies*.
8. Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).
9. Girardian theory does not belong to theology *sensu stricto*, but to anthropology; this ought to be obvious enough, but is often misunderstood. However, Girardian theory does have theological implications, and it is structured as a theology: it has origins, an era of *méconnaissance* (see *Les origines de la culture*, 85–94), the Old Testament as a *praeparatio evangelica*, revelation, and postrevelational choice between truth/nonviolence and illusion/violence (see Augustine's two cities), and so forth.
10. Claus Westermann, *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1985), 88–101.
11. Serres, *The Natural Contract*.
12. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3, 4.
13. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 18–19.
14. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 119–37.



15. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 227, 231.
16. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 258.
17. The *Mythologies* consist of the following: *The Raw and the Cooked* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969); *From Honey to Ashes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973); *The Origin of Table Manners* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978); and *The Naked Man* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).
18. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 35–37, 66–78.
19. Among the different versions, see, for example, Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 31–32 (Klamath: M<sub>530</sub>), 153–54 (Yurok, M<sub>557a</sub>), 363–64 (Coeur d'Alène: M<sub>664a</sub>), 368–73 (Thompson: M<sub>667a</sub>), 380–82 (Snohomish: M<sub>677</sub>), 501–2 (Arapaho: M<sub>759</sub>), 525–26 (Ute: M<sub>775</sub>), and 530–32 (Navajo: M<sub>776</sub>).
20. Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 360–61.
21. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Didier Eribon, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 142: “In everything I have written on mythology I have wanted to show that one never arrives at a final meaning.” See also Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 619.
22. Lévi-Strauss and Didier Eribon, *Conversations*, 136f; “D.E. [Didier Eribon]: You meant that all the myths analyzed throughout the four volumes were in fact only a variation of the same myth? . . . C.L.S. [Claude Lévi-Strauss]: Variations on a great theme, at least: the passage from nature to culture, which must be paid for with a definitive breakdown of communication between the heavenly and earthly realms. And the result for humanity is the problems treated by this mythology.” See also Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 602: “In the last resort, there is only one absolutely undecidable sequence in the case of each mythological system. When reduced to its essential features through a series of transformations, this sequence boils down to the expression of an opposition, or, to be more accurate, to the expression of the opposition as being the initial datum. . . . there is the sky and there is the earth; between the two there can be no conceivable parity; consequently, the presence on earth of that celestial phenomenon, fire, is a mystery; since celestial fire is now present here below on the domestic earth, it must have been brought down from the sky by an expedition which went up from the earth to fetch it.”
23. See Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 563: “Or again, are we to conclude that, throughout the entire American continent, there is only one myth, which all the populations have evolved through some mysterious impulse, but which is so rich in details and in the multiplicity of its variants that several volumes barely suffice to describe it?”
24. On the one hand, Lévi-Strauss very often categorically rejects any attempt at reinstating a universal mythology in the nineteenth-century style, and he insists on studying only American myths (see, for example, *The Story of Lynx*, 187–88). On the other hand, he almost as often refers to myths and related phenomena outside the American context in order to elucidate a hypothesis, a theme, and so forth, reluctantly accepting thereby that resemblances and connections between America and other parts of the world cannot be purely accidental. In *The Story of Lynx*, Lévi-Strauss even more often than in his earlier work connects North American themes and usages with Siberian and other Asiatic, and even European, parallels (see, for example, 108 [Siberia], 15–16 [Siberia, Korea], 159 [Siberia, Japan, China], 84–85 [Asia, Europe], 95 [Japan, East Asia], and 197 [Polynesia]). Lévi-Strauss warns against forgetting that “European folktales preserve themes and motifs that are very ancient and had lots of time to spread across the world. . . . Thus it cannot be ruled out that, in archaic times, when exchanges were occurring in the North between

the shores of the Pacific Ocean, entire myths or mythical elements passed from Asia to America" (184–85). However, nowhere (to my knowledge) has Lévi-Strauss explained why his comparative project, which finally perceives South and North American myths as belonging to one great mythology (and, hypothetically, generated from one "unique myth"), could not, in principle at least, be extended over the Bering Straits into Siberia and from there, step by step, constantly relating the mythical subsystems to their particular ethnographic and historical contexts, to the shores of the Atlantic and to the Cape of Good Hope.

25. In one instance, Lévi-Strauss comes very close to assuming a fundamental human experience behind all myth and all religion: in *The Naked Man* (622), he proposes that the "unique myth" should be regarded as a reflection of the original conquest of fire: "This event, crucial for the life and future of mankind, is, as we know, the theft of fire from the sky by a terrestrial hero who, by going there either voluntarily or against his will, brings into play an opposition which is deemed essential in mythic thought and is perhaps the root-source of other religious images, including those of our own culture. 'In the last resort,' writes M. E. Benveniste . . . , 'the only thing that the Indo-European community can be credited with is the idea of "god." It is widely in evidence in the form *'deivos*, the literal meaning of which is "luminous" and "celestial"; in this respect, gods are opposed to human beings, who are "terrestrial" (this, indeed, is the meaning of the Latin word *homo*).'"
26. In the Ute and Mono versions of the Bird-Nester myth, the same or a similar transformation takes place (Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 524–29; *The Story of Lynx*, 261–63).
27. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 192.
28. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 42.
29. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 60.
30. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 171.
31. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 5, 18.
32. Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 58. Lévi-Strauss also refers to South American myths as members of the same thematic group as the myths about Lynx and Coyote: a long Tupinamba myth gives a person named Maire Pochy the same function as Lynx has in the northwestern American myths: he is ugly, deformed, and has magical powers. His son, also called Maire, is also a powerful magician. Earlier in this myth, the demiurge Maire-Monan, with whom civilization begins, is burned on a stake by his rebellious contemporaries; the first god, Manon, burned the first race of human beings in anger over their ingratitude toward his generosity (44–46).
33. Lévi-Strauss mentions a similar example in the Kutenai myth of the cultural hero Yaukekam, who transforms animated beings into present-day cultural goods, and the animals' forefathers into what they are today. Being a great sorcerer he spreads terror around him; he is killed and his body is thrown into water; afterward he rises again and becomes a big chief (Lévi-Strauss, *The Story of Lynx*, 60).
34. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 68–88.
35. This is an assumption that seems to be more than sufficiently confirmed by the handbooks. See Stanley Walens, "North American Indians, Indians of the North West Coast," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 10 (New York: MacMillan 1987), 502–3; "Witchcraft,"

- Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico* (St. Claire Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1968, reprint of 2nd impression, 1912); Philip Drucker, *Indians of the North West Coast* (Garden City, NY: Natural History Press, 1955), 159–61. Some specific examples include the following: for the Lilloet, see James Alexander Teit, *The Lilloet Indians*, *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 2, pt. 5 (New York: G. E. Stechert, 1906), 288 (“Shamans were sometimes killed for bewitching or causing the death of people”); for the Shuswap and Chilcotin, see James Teit, *The Shuswap*, *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 2, pt. 7 (New York: G. E. Stechert, 1909), 709; for the Yokut, see A. H. Gayton, *Yokuts and Western Mono Ethnography. I: Tular Lake, Southern Valley, and Central Foothill Yokuts*, *Anthropological Records*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), 34 (“Doctors [Shamans], who were believed to cause deaths were usually killed when someone had courage to do it”), and see also 47.
36. Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 29–30 (Klamath-Modoc: M529).
  37. Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 344, 362, 389; Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 133–34.
  38. Comparing biblical material with American material, even if only typologically, is, for obvious methodological, theoretical, and ideological reasons, controversial. See, however, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Jerusalem: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Against Lévi-Strauss’s own refusal to apply structural analysis to Hebrew Bible texts, see Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Jerusalem*, 80–84.
  39. The Bird-Nester is isolated “upward” and Joseph “downward”; but, as we have seen, certain North American versions (Ute, Mono) leave the Bird-Nester isolated downward, and the story of the boy who caught the wind (a transformation of the Bird-Nester, according to Lévi-Strauss) does the same thing. In the myth of the Loon Lady, an important myth in Oregon and another transformation of the Bird-Nester myth, the hero and his father are abandoned and almost totally buried alive, that is, “hurled downwards,” while the Bird-Nester was “raised upwards” (Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 112).
  40. An important point that cannot be discussed here is the relationship between fire and bread. If my assumption of a transformational relationship between the Joseph story and the Bird-Nester myth is correct, bread must assume a place in Hebrew mythology comparable to the place fire occupies in Gê mythology. This is in fact the case; the Hebrew myth that explains the origin of culture (Gen. 2–3) is no doubt basically a myth about the origin of agriculture, that is, of bread (see my published dissertation, Hans J. L. Jensen, *Den fortærende ild. Strukturelle analyser af narrative og rituelle tekster in Det Gamle Testamente* (The Consuming Fire. Structural Analyses of Narrative and Ritual Text in the Old Testament) (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2000).
  41. Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 342.
  42. The idea that the Joseph story is an inverted scapegoat story can be corroborated by internal Hebrew Bible facts. The Joseph story has close connections to Genesis 19, an outstanding example of a Biblical treatment of the theme of lynching (and Gen. 19 has, of course, a close parallel in another story about lynching, Judg. 19). While Joseph is lynched because he wants or is supposed to want to become the master of his brothers (“Do you think that you will indeed be king over us and rule us?”), Lot is almost lynched because he is a stranger who is accused of wanting to be a ruler (Gen. 19:9: “This fellow has come and settled here as an alien, and does he now take it upon himself to judge us?” The Hebrew word for “to judge” here, *shapat*, also means “to rule”). The brothers surround, *sabab*,

Joseph, in his dream (Gen. 37:7), while the inhabitants of Sodom surround, *sabab*, Lot's house (Gen. 19:4). That the lynching theme in Genesis 37 is indirectly related to sacrifice is hinted at by the verbal correspondence between Genesis 37:22 ("do not raise hand against him") and the story about the sacrifice of Isaac, in Genesis 22:12 ("do not raise your hand against the boy"). In both cases the life of a close relative, a son or a brother, is spared. The sacrificial theme is also present, more discreetly, in Genesis 19.

While Joseph and Oedipus are both accused—justly or unjustly—of a (metaphorical or real, intended or unintended) incestuous sexual transgression, the persecutors in Genesis 19 attempt an intended, sexual, anti-incestuous crime (homosexual gang rape of heavenly visitors), while the victim himself eventually becomes guilty of an unintended incestuous transgression—not that of a son with his mother (like Oedipus or, metaphorically, Joseph) but that of a father with his daughters.

43. See William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"
44. Westermann, *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen*, 99–100.
45. Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners*, 252–53, 305–37; Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 581, 589–98.
46. Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, 584–87 (Quinault: M<sub>804</sub>; Quileute: M<sub>782</sub>). There are even similarities between Genesis 28 and the Gè version of the Bird Nester myth—with Yahweh playing the jaguar's part.