PsyBibs Psychology and Biblical Studies
SBL Annual Meeting Papers, November 2008
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The City and the Tower of Babel

Wayne Rollins has asked me to react here to of *Psychological Insight into the Bible*, "Part 2", but with a large allowance as to the theme of my presentation. The present paper, I confess, would rather fit Part 1 ch. 3, on Freud and Jung. My rationale is that my ongoing research these days focuses on the story of the Babel tower, which I read as a myth. As such, both psychoanalysis and history of religion have a lot to contribute to its understanding. I plan therefore to present here some excerpts from the Prologue to a book in process on *The City and the Tower of Babel*.

This book is the third volume of a trilogy based on three successive Genesis myths---in the noblest sense of the word---invented (or reported in new terms) by the Yahwist and set in the primeval era. The first essay studies the myth of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3;[1] the second essay addresses itself to the one of Cain and Abel;[2] and now the present volume is about Babel.

In what follows, Psychological Biblical Criticism and History of Religion Criticism will be used to read Genesis 11:1-9, along with the indispensable tools of historical, linguistic, literary, and sociological, criticisms. The fields of History of Religion and of Psychoanalysis are very close to each other; both are interested in myths as unveiling the depths of human soul. In the ancient Greek world, for example, the "Oedipus Complex," the Minotaur labyrinth, or again the Icarus Flight, have been shown to reflect a deep understanding of the human psyche and of the human spiritual dimension.[3]

As regards the Bible, Psychology and History of Religion are certainly not the sole critical methods of understanding, but they are of prime importance as far as narrative and tradition-analyses are concerned. In the stories assembled in the early chapters of Genesis, it seems evident---at least to a non-fundamentalist-

[1] *The Trial of Innocence; Adam, Eve, and the Yahwist.*

[2] *Onslaught against Innocence: Cain, Abel, and the Yahwist.*

[3] All of these condensed generally into what is called "theory of personality."

--that the symbolic dimension is preponderant, wherein "something . . . represents something else."[4] The serpent in Genesis 3 is more than the speaking reptile of the story. The forbidden fruit is in reference to "something else;" etc. Rollins-Kille write, "as artifacts of human intention and reflections of human experience, biblical texts also demonstrate traces of deep psychological dynamics common to human beings."[5] They quote John A. Sanford, "A myth is the product of the unconscious mind; for this reason its full meaning goes beyond the present state of awareness not only of those who read the myth but of those who tell the myth'"[6] The problem for Psychological Biblical Criticism, therefore, is one of reference. If the tower of Babel is more than a simple tower, what does the symbol refer to?

In fact, within the abundant symbolism displayed by J in the first chapters of Genesis, the one of the tower of Babel comes as a grand finale. When dealing with "Adam and Eve," or with "Cain and Abel," in the preceding two volumes of the present trilogy, we saw that J's set of symbols in both of these narratives has for the last 25 centuries belonged to a universal classics collection. Now, the symbolism enshrined in the Babel story is no less classic and universal. By this I mean that its validity and "modernity" has not diminished along the ages. Two things contribute to its continued relevance: the intrinsic psychological and existential power of J's images, and the thrifty way adopted by the author to "sing" his tale.[7]

About the latter point, I have in the preceding volumes addressed the deceptive simplicity of J's narratives. Their surface plainness hides an unfathomable depth. Suffice it here to recall the endless interpretations of Genesis 3. The very first thing J's readers must acknowledge is that he is no historian, but a mythologist. True, Genesis 11 is no pure myth, but the tale is sufficiently mythic to be treated as such with prudence. The story of Babel is more than an archaeological report (say, on the Babylonian ziggurat), more than an etiological theory (on the diversity of languages and on the very name of

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[4] D. Andrew Kille, *Psychological Biblical Criticism.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, 142. Wayne Rollins' definition of the "psychological-critical approach to Scripture" is thought-provoking: "The goal of a psychological approach is to examine texts, their origination, authorship, modes of expression, their construction, transmission, translation, reading, interpretation, their transposition into kindred and alien art forms and the history of their personal and cultural effect, as expressions of the structure, processes, and habits of the human psyche, both in individual and collective manifestations, past and present" (*Psychological Insight*, 17-18).

[5] Wayne G. Rollins and D. Andrew Kille, *Psychological Insight into the Bible; Texts and Readings*. Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK, Eerdmans, 2007, 159.

[6] Ibid., 160-61 (from Sanford, *The Man who Wrestled with God: Light from the Old Testament on the Psychology of Individuation.* New York: Paulist Press, 1981, 116).

[7] See Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales.* New York: Atheneum, 1978. (The ascetic brevity of our tale [9 verses] may be an indication that the written version of it served originally as a basis for oral performance, which would elaborate upon its elements.)

Babylon), more than an historical reminiscence (about the Babylonian melting-pot of the sixth century BCE), and, needless to say, more than entertainment. Genesis 11 speaks to our *imagination*. It belongs to *mythos*.

In this respect, the etiological dimension of Genesis 11:9 brings an important confirmation. In some anthropological schools "mythical" just means "explanatory."[8] Another warrant is provided by the restricted area of space the story is dealing with. The focus is exclusive and unapologetically so (see Gen 11:2). It makes of *Shine'ar* a somewhat mysterious place, nor entirely to be identified with the Southern half of Mesopotamia (Sumer and Akkad). The unity of space is thus made easy. So is also the unity of time as the grandiose construction of Babel and its tower is literarily condensed into part of one single verse (v. 4)! On both these scores, we face a minimizing process of geography and history that fits the mythic. It also goes along with J's disguised sarcasm as regards Babylon.

It fits the mythic to the very extent that space is "used to make the world intelligible by the translation of felt qualities into spatial images," as says Rogerson.[9] The same author refers to F. Max Müller's view of myth as "a psychological and linguistic theory which seeks to describe how the human understanding, together with human language, developed at the dawn of man's history."[10] As we know, Israel kept up the ancient Near-Eastern mythical expressions to state its theology, convinced as she was that the only appropriate language for theology is analogical. Hence the attraction of *mythos* over *logos*.

But there was an important obstacle, namely, the intrinsic mythical tenet according to which primeval events *determine* all subsequent reality. Israel could not condone such a conception that blocks all divine historical initiative. That is why Israel proceeded to "demythologize," to use a Bultmannian term. But along with historicizing myth, Israel mythicized history and attributed to historical events (like the Exodus, for instance) a paradigmatic quality.[11] As for J in Gen 11, he wanted his readers to realize that they themselves are among Babel's builders. "Babel" then became the symbol of all of our constructions and fabrications, with their inexorable outcome: confusion (of our life messages) and scattering (of all the pieces of our projects).

Whatever may have been J's purpose in telling the Tower of Babel story, he clearly set it in the context of other tales of the primeval era, all of which go

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[8] See J. W. Rogerson, "Anthropological Mythology" in *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation*, 54, 175.

[9] Ibid., 88 (paraphrasing E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 2*, 1955, 86ff.

[10] Ibid., 176.

[11] See J. Hempel, "Glaube, Mythos und Geschichte im Alten Testament" *ZAW* 65 (1953), 109ff. See also W. Johnstone, "The Mythologizing of History in the Old Testament" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971), 201-217.

much beyond the goal of entertaining. Like all that pertains to *Urzeit,* Genesis 1 – 11 stories set up archetypes[12] and, finally, a definite orientation to history.

Let us note that speaking of Babel and its tower as symbolic is not another way of reading the biblical text as allegorical. In the ancient world, the symbol is one with the reality it represents. The city *is* the city *and* the carrier of femininity. The tower is itself and "phallic." It stands in the closest possible relationship with the city.

It is the task of the critic to explore the relation of the sign to its referent, of the signifier to the signified, of the manifest to the latent. As the Tower of Babel is not a pure myth, as I said, it may even happen that the modern psychological reading goes beyond J's original intention. But the same situation presents itself in the story of Oedipus or of Icarus. The truth is that the author's subconscious, like body language for instance, is mediated through unconscious means. Did J intend to have Babel the city as representing femininity, and the tower as a phallus symbol? We do not know, but we know that the authorial intent never exhausts the text's meanings.[13] The original author of the Oedipus story certainly did not fathom the enormous impact his tale would have on modern theory of personality. But anything warranted ever said by modern psychologists about Oedipus was already true *before* the tale took shape. The Oedipus myth is a truth that found one expression of itself in the original tale, and then in other versions of subsequent retellings. That truth now belongs to the psychological dynamics of the written text.

The objective reality confirms the tower of Babel symbolism. Historical Babylon deprived of its ziggurat loses its very identity.[14] And a ziggurat in the desert is nonsensical, an aberration. This conjugation constitutes a supplementary warrant that Genesis 11:8 was in no need to addition city and tower. One of the two implied the other, like speaking of a vessel lost at sea, without necessarily adding "with all hands." In short, in Gen 11, J has the actual Babylon in mind, with its "tower" crowned by the Esagila shrine. But Babylon is in a broader reference to the "Babel" of human hubris and stupidity. There, they speak "one language,"[15] but if you come closer, within earshot, you realize that their tongue is sound and fury.

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[12] Archetype, of course, is also a Jungian concept. He believed that mythic motifs are inherited, universal, and collective (the "collective unconscious"). Biblical stories often reflect psychic archetypes (see Jung *CW* 18, 156).

[13] Cf. Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutic of suspicion." See also his concept of the "surplus of meaning."

[14] The ziggurat was seven cosmic stories high that correspond to the seven planetary heavens. We find the same symbolism in the "seven steps" which take Buddha to the top of the world, thus transcending space and time.

[15] In J's tale, the oneness of language is in reference to an exclusive purpose and its technology (Gen 11:4, 3). It also pointedly refers to *logos* in contradistinction to *mythos.*

Rollins-Kille speak of "... the universal presence of the *unconscious* in all we do, think, want, feel, create, remember and forget---in religion as well as in the rest of life."[16] This incontrovertible principle is, of course, of prime importance. Not only as regards a possible psychoanalysis of biblical personalities (such as Ezekiel or Jesus), but as regards the psychodynamics of J's narratives.

Of special interest in what follows is the Jungian definition of archetypes as primordial images of the collective unconscious. We'll take Rollins and Kille's warning at heart, "Symbols don't send a single, simple, instant message. Symbols, unlike signs, are 'alive' and somehow carry with them a piece of the living reality they represent."[17]

So, in a thoroughly "demythologized" time as ours, myth reenters the scene with an amazing relevance, thanks to psychoanalysis and history of religion. The modern social sciences cannot exist independently of myths. Neither does theology. What brings these two fields together is the unutterability of the human soul and of the divine holiness. In both cases, only approximations will do. Psychoanalysis and history of religion criticisms have revived a keen interest in ancient and modern folkloric tales. No one today can read J's narratives while ignoring these valuable tools. What the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had thought to have disposed of as irrelevant and primitive has proven to be a golden key to theology and anthropology. From this point of view, the story of the Tower of Babel has never been more pertinent than today, as it brings its reader "to understand oneself in front of the text."[18]

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[16] Wayne G. Rollins and D. Andrew Kille, *Psychological Insight into the Bible*, 41.

[17] Rollins and Kille, 100.

[18] Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation." In *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (75-88). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991, 88.