The Myth of the Birth of the Hero

A Psychological Interpretation of Mythology

BY

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[A PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF MYTHOLOGY]

INTRODUCTION

The prominent civilized nations, such as the Babylonians, Egyptians, Hebrews, and Hindoos, the inhabitants of Iran and of Persia, the Greeks and the Romans as well as the Teutons and others, all began at an early stage to glorify their heroes, mythical princes and kings, founders of religions, dynasties, empires or cities, in brief their national heroes, in a number of poetic tales and legends. The history of the birth and of the early life of these personalities came to be especially invested with fantastic features, which in different nations even though widely separated by space and entirely independent of each other present a baffling similarity, or in part a literal correspondence. Many investigators have long been impressed with this fact, and one of the chief problems of mythical research still consists in the elucidation of the reason for the extensive analogies in the fundamental outlines of mythical tales, which are rendered still more enigmatical by the unanimity in certain details, and their reappearance in most of the mythical groupings.[1]

The mythological theories, aiming at the explanation of these remarkable phenomena, are, in a general way, as follows:

(1) The “Idea of the People,” propounded by Adolf Bastian[2][1868]. This theory assumes the existence of *elementary thoughts*, so that the unanimity of the myths is a necessary sequence of the uniform disposition of the human mind, and the manner of its manifestation, which within certain limits is identical at all times and in all places. This interpretation was urgently advocated by Adolf Bauer[3] [1882], as accounting for the wide distribution of the hero myths.

(2) The explanation by original community, first applied by Th. Benfey [Pantschatantra, 1859] to the widely distributed parallel forms of folklore and fairy tales. Originating in a favorable locality [India] these tales were first accepted by the primarily related [namely the Indo-Germanic] peoples, then continued to grow while retaining the common primary traits, and ultimately radiated over the entire earth. This mode of explanation was first adapted to the wide distribution of the hero myths by Rudolf Schubert[4] [1890].

(3) The modern theory of migration, or borrowing, according to which the individual myths originate from definite peoples [especially the Babylonians], and are accepted by other peoples through oral tradition [commerce and traffic], or through literary influences.[5]

The modern theory of migration and borrowing can be readily shown to be merely a modification of Benfey’s theory, necessitated by newly discovered and irreconcilable material. The profound and extensive research of modern investigations has shown that not India, but rather Babylonia, may be regarded as the first home of the myths. Moreover the mythic tales presumably did not radiate from a single point, but travelled over and across the entire inhabited globe. This brings into prominence the idea of the interdependence of mythical structures, an idea which was

generalized by Braun[6] [1864], as the basic law of the nature of the human mind: Nothing new is ever discovered as long as it is possible to copy. The theory of the elementary thoughts, so strenuously advocated by Bauer over a quarter of a century ago, is unconditionally declined by the most recent investigators [Winckler,[7] Stucken], who maintain the migration and purloining theory.

There is really no such sharp contrast between the various theories, and their advocates, for the theory of the elementary thoughts does not interfere with the claims of the primary common possessions and the migration. Furthermore, the ultimate problem is not whence and how the material reached a certain people; but the question is, *where did it come from to begin with?* All these theories would only explain the variability and distribution, but not the origin of the myths. Even Schubert, the most inveterate opponent of Bauer's view, acknowledges this truth, by stating that all these manifold sagas date back to a single very ancient prototype. But he is unable to tell us anything of the origin of this prototype. Bauer likewise inclines to this mediating[8] view and points out repeatedly that in spite of the multiple origin of independent tales, it is necessary to concede a most extensive and ramified purloining, as well as an original community of the concepts, in related peoples. The same conciliatory attitude is maintained by Lessmann, in a recent publication[9] [1908], in which he rejects the assumption of the elementary thoughts, but admits that primary relationship and purloining do not exclude one another. As pointed out by Wundt, it must be kept in mind, however, that the appropriation of mythical contents always represents at the same time an independent mythical construction; because only that can be permanently retained which corresponds

to the purloiner's stage of mythological ideation. The faint recollections of preceding narratives would hardly suffice for the re-figuration of the same material, without the persistent presence of the underlying motives; but precisely for this reason, such motives may produce new contents, which agree in their fundamental motives, also in the absence of similar associations. (Völker-Psychologie, II Vol., 3 Part, 1909).

Leaving aside for the present the enquiry as to the mode of distribution of these myths, the origin of the hero myth in general is now to be investigated, fully anticipating that migration, or borrowing, will prove to be directly and fairly positively demonstrable, in a number of the cases. When this is not feasible, other view points will have to be conceded, at least for the present, rather than barricade the way to further progress by the somewhat unscientific attitude of Winckler,[10] who says: When human beings and products, exactly corresponding to each other, are found at remote parts of the earth, we must conclude that they have wandered thither; whether we have knowledge of the how or when makes no difference in the assumption of the fact itself. Even granting the migration of all myths, the provenance of the first myth would still have to be explained.[11]

Investigations along these lines will necessarily help to provide a deeper insight into the contents of the myths. Nearly all authors who have hitherto been engaged upon the interpretation of the myths of the birth of heroes find therein a personification of the processes of nature, following the dominant mode of natural mythological interpretation. The new born hero is the young sun rising from the waters, first confronted by lowering clouds, but finally triumphing over all obstacles [Brodbeck, Zoroaster, Leipzig, 1893, p. 138]. The taking of all natural, chiefly the atmospheric

phenomena into consideration, as was done by the first representatives of this method of myth interpretation;[12] or the regarding of the myths in a more restricted sense, as astral myths [Stucken, Winckler and others]—is not so essentially distinct, as the followers of each individual direction believe to be the case. Nor does it seem to be an essential progress when the purely solar interpretation as advocated especially by Frobenius[13] was no longer accepted and the view was held that all myths were originally lunar myths, as done by G. Hüsing, in his "Contributions to the Kyros Myth" [Berlin, 1906], following out the suggestion of Siecke, who [1908][14] claims this view as the only legitimate obvious interpretation also for the birth myths of the heroes, and it is beginning to gain popularity.[15]

The interpretation of the myths themselves will be taken up in detail later on, and all detailed critical comments on the above mode of explanation are here refrained from. Although significant, and undoubtedly in part correct, the astral theory is not altogether satisfactory and fails to afford an insight into the motives of myth formation. The objection may be raised that the tracing to astronomical processes does not fully represent the content of these myths, and that much clearer and simpler relations might be established through another mode of interpretation. The much abused theory of elementary thoughts indicates a practically neglected aspect of mythological research. At the beginning as well as at the end of his contribution, Bauer points out how much more natural and probable it would be to seek the reason for the general unanimity of these myths in very general traits of the human psyche, than in a primary community or in migration. This assumption appears to be more justifiable as such general movements of the human mind are also expressed in still other

forms, and in other domains, where they can be demonstrated as unanimous.

Concerning the character of these general movements of the human mind, the psychological study of the essential contents of these myths might help to reveal the source from which has uniformly flowed at all times, and in all places, an identical content of the myths. Such a derivation of an essential constituent, from a common human source, has already been successfully attempted with one of these legendary motives. Freud, in his "Dream Interpretation,"[16] reveals the connection of the Œdipus fable [where Œdipus is told by the oracle that he will kill his father and marry his mother, as he unwittingly does later on] with the two typical dreams of the father's death, and of sexual intercourse with the mother, dreams which are dreamed by many now living. Of King Œdipus he says that "his fate stirs us only because it might have been our own fate; because the oracle has cursed us prior to our birth, as it did him. All of us, perhaps, were doomed to direct the first sexual emotion towards the mother, the first hatred and aggressive desire against the father; our dreams convince us of this truth. King Œdipus, who has murdered his father Laios, and married his mother Iokaste, is merely the wish fulfilment of our childhood."[17] The manifestation of the intimate relation between dream and myth,—not only in regard to the contents, but also as to the form and motor forces of this and many other, more particularly pathological psyche structures,—entirely justifies the interpretation of the myth as a dream of the masses of the people, which I have recently shown elsewhere ("Der Künstler," 1907). At the same time, the transference of the method, and in part also of the results, of Freud's technique of dream interpretation to the myths would seem to be justifiable, as was defended and illustrated

in an example, by Abraham, in his paper on “Dreams and Myths” [1909].[18] The intimate relations between dream and myth find further confirmation in the following circle of myths, with frequent opportunity for reasoning from analogy.

The hostile attitude of the most modern mythological tendency [chiefly represented by the Society for Comparative Mythological Research] against all attempts at establishing a relation between dream and myth[19] is for the most part the outcome of the restriction of the parallelization to the so-called nightmares [Alpträume], as attempted in Laistner’s notable book, “The Riddle of the Sphinx,” 1889, and also of ignorance of the relevant teachings of Freud. The latter help us not only to understand the dreams themselves, but also show their symbolism and close relationship with all psychic phenomena in general, especially with the day dreams or phantasies, with artistic creativeness, and with certain disturbances of the normal psychic function. A common share in all these productions belongs to a single psychic function, the human imagination. It is to this imaginative faculty—of humanity at large rather than individual—that the modern myth theory is obliged to concede a high rank, perhaps the first, for the ultimate origin of all myths. The interpretation of the myths in the astral sense, or more accurately speaking as “almanac tales,” gives rise to the query, according to Lessmann,—in view of a creative imagination of humanity,—if the first germ for the origin of such tales is to be sought precisely in the processes in the heavens;[20] or if, on the contrary, readymade tales of an entirely different [but presumably psychic] origin were only subsequently transferred to the heavenly bodies. Ehrenreich (General Mythology, 1910, p. 104) makes a more positive admission: The mythologic evolution certainly begins on a terrestrian soil, in so far as experiences must

first be gathered in the immediate surroundings before they can be projected into the heavenly universe. And Wundt tells us (loc. cit., p. 282) that the theory of the evolution of mythology according to which it first originates in the heavens whence at a later period it descends to earth, is not only contradictory to the history of the myth, which is unaware of such a migration, but is likewise contradictory to the psychology of myth-formation which must repudiate this translocation as internally impossible. We are also convinced that the myths,[21] originally at least, are structures of the human faculty of imagination, which at some time were projected for certain reasons upon the heavens,[22] and may be secondarily transferred to the heavenly bodies, with their enigmatical phenomena. The significance of the unmistakeable traces which this transference has imprinted upon the myths, as the fixed figures, and so forth, must by no means be underrated, although the origin of these figures was possibly psychic in character, and they were subsequently made the basis of the almanac and firmament calculations, precisely on account of this significance.

In a general way it would seem as if those investigators who make use of an exclusively natural mythological mode of interpretation, in any sense, were unable, in their endeavor to discover the original sense of the mythical tales, to get entirely away from a psychological process, such as must be assumed likewise for the creators of the myths.[23] The motive is identical, and led to the same course in the myth creators as well as in the myth interpretorsIt is most naïvely uttered by one of the founders and champions of comparative myth investigation, and of the natural mythological mode of interpretation, for Max Müller points out in his “Essays” [1869] [20] that this procedure not only invests meaningless legends with a significance and beauty of their own,

but it helps to remove some of the most revolting features of classical mythology, and to elucidate their true meaning. This revolt, the reason for which is readily understood, naturally prevents the mythologist from assuming that such motives as incest with the mother, sister or daughter; murder of father, grandfather or brother could be based upon universal phantasies, which according to Freud's teachings have their source in the infantile psyche, with its peculiar interpretation of the external world and its denizens. This revolt is therefore only the reaction of the dimly sensed painful recognition of the actuality of these relations; and this reaction impels the interpreters of the myths, for their own subconscious rehabilitation, and that of all mankind, to credit these motives with an entirely different meaning from their original significance. The same internal repudiation prevents the myth-creating people from believing in the possibility of such revolting thoughts, and this defence probably was the first reason for the projecting of these relations to the firmament. The psychological pacifying through such a rehabilitation, by projection upon external and remote objects, can still be realized, up to a certain degree, by a glance at one of these interpretations, for instance that of the objectionable Œdipus fable, as given by a representative of the natural mythological mode of interpretation. Œdipus, who kills his father, marries his mother, and dies old and blind, is the solar hero who murders his procreator, the darkness; shares his couch with the mother, the gloaming, from whose lap, the dawn, he has been born, and dies blinded, as the setting sun [Goldziher, 1876]. [24]

It is intelligible that a similar interpretation is more soothing to the mind than the revelation of the fact that incest and murder impulses against the nearest relatives are found in the phantasies of

most people, as remnants of the infantile ideation. But this is not a scientific argument, and revolt of this kind, although it may not always be equally conscious, is altogether out of place, in view of existing facts. One must either become reconciled to these indecencies, provided they are felt to be such, or one must abandon the study of psychological phenomena. It is evident that human beings, even in the earliest times, and with a most naïve imagination, never saw incest and parricide in the firmament on high, [25] but it is far more probable that these ideas are derived from another source, presumably human. In what way they came to reach the sky, and what modifications or additions they received in the process, are questions of a secondary character, which cannot be settled until the psychic origin of the myths in general has been established.

At any rate, besides the astral conception, the claims of the part played by the psychic life must be credited with the same rights for myth formation, and this plea will be amply vindicated by the results of our method of interpretation. With this object we shall first take up the legendary material on which such a psychological interpretation is to be attempted for the first time on a large scale; selecting from the mass [26] of these chiefly biographical hero myths those which are the best known, and some which are especially characteristic. These myths will be given in abbreviated form as far as relevant for this investigation, with statements concerning the provenance. Attention will be called to the most important, constantly recurrent motives by a difference in print.

SARGON

Probably the oldest transmitted hero myth in our possession is derived from the period of the foundation of Babylon (about 2800 B.C.), and concerns the birth history of its founder, Sargon the First. The literal translation of the report—which according to the mode of rendering appears to be an original inscription by King Sargon himself—is as follows: [27]

"Sargon, the mighty king, King of Agade, am I. *My mother was a vestal, my father I knew not*, while my father's brother dwelt in the mountains. In my city Azupirani, which is situated on the bank of the Euphrates, my mother, the vestal, bore me. *In a hidden place she brought me forth. She laid me in a vessel made of reeds*, closed my door with pitch, and *dropped me down into the river*, which did not drown me. The river carried me to Akki, the water carrier. Akki the water carrier lifted me up in the kindness of his heart, Akki the water carrier raised me as his own son, Akki the water carrier made of me his gardener. In my work as a gardener I was beloved by Istar, I became the king, and for 45 years I held kingly sway."

MOSES

The biblical birth history of Moses, which is told in Exodus, chapter 2, presents the greatest similarity to the Sargon legend, even an almost literal correspondence of individual traits. [28] Already the first chapter (22) relates that Pharaoh commanded his people to throw into the water all sons which were born to Hebrews, while the daughters were permitted to live; the reason for this order being referred to the overfertility of the Israelites. The second chapter continues as follows:

"And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi [29]. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink. And his sister stood afar off to wit what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she opened it, she saw the child, and behold the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, this is one of the Hebrews' children. Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee wages. And the woman took the

child, and nursed it. And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: [30] and she said, Because I drew him out of the water."

This account is ornamented by Rabbi mythology through an account of the events preceding Moses' birth. In the sixtieth year after Joseph's death, the reigning Pharaoh saw in his dream an old man, who held a pair of scales, all the inhabitants of Egypt lay on one side, with only a sucking lamb on the other, but nevertheless this outweighed all the Egyptians. The startled king at once consulted the wise men and astrologers, who declared the dream to mean that a son would be born to the Israelites, who would destroy all Egypt. The king was frightened, and at once ordered the death of all newborn children of the Israelites in the entire country. On account of this tyrannical order, the Levite Amram, who lived in Goshen, meant to separate from his wife Jocabed, so as not to foredoom to certain death the children conceived from him. But this resolution was opposed later on by his daughter Miriam, who foretold with prophetic assurance that precisely the child suggested in the king's dream would come forth from her mother's womb, and would become the liberator of his people. [31]

Amram therefore rejoined his wife, from whom he had been separated for three years. At the end of three months, she conceived, and later on bore a boy at whose birth the entire house was illuminated by an extraordinary luminous radiance, suggesting the truth of the prophecy. (After Bergel, "Mythology of the Hebrews," Leipzig, 1882.)

Similar accounts are given of the birth of the ancestor of the Hebrew nation, Abraham. He was a son of Therach—Nimrod's

captain—and Amtelai. Prior to his birth, it was revealed to King Nimrod, from the stars, that the coming child would overthrow the thrones of powerful princes, and take possession of their lands. King Nimrod means to have the child killed immediately after its birth. But when the boy is requested from Therach, he says: Truly a son was born to me, but he has died. He then delivers a strange child, concealing his own son in a cave underneath the ground, where God permits him to suck milk from a finger of the right hand. In this cave, Abraham is said to have remained until the third (according to others the tenth) year of his life. (Compare Beer, "The Life of Abraham," according to the interpretation of Jewish traditions, Leipzig, 1859, and Aug. Wünsche, "From Israel's Temples of Learning," Leipzig, 1907.) Also in the next generation, in the story of *Isaac*, appear the same mythical motives. Prior to his birth King Abimelech is warned by a *dream* not to touch Sarah, as this would cause woe to betide him. After a long period of barrenness, she finally bears her son, who (in later life, in this report) after having been destined to be *sacrificed by his own father* (foster-father) Abraham, is ultimately *rescued* by God. But Abraham casts out his own son Ishmael, with Hagar, the boy's mother (Genesis 20, 6. See also Bergel, loc. Cit.).

KARNA

A close relationship with the Sargon legend is also shown in certain features of the ancient Hindu epic [32] Mahâbhâràta, of the birth of the hero Karna. The contents of the legend are briefly rendered by Lassen (“Indische Altertumskunde,” I, p. 63). [33]

The princess Pritha, also known as Kunti, bore as a virgin the boy Karna, whose father was the sun god Surya. The young Karna was born with the golden ear ornaments of his father and with an unbreakable coat of mail. The mother in her distress concealed and exposed the boy. In the adaptation of the myth by A. Holtzmann, [34] verse 1458 reads: “Then my nurse and I made a large basket of rushes, placed a lid thereon, and lined it with wax; into this basket I laid the boy and carried him down to the river Acva.” Floating on the waves, the basket reaches the river Ganga and travels as far as the city of Campa. “There was passing along the bank of the river, the charioteer, the noble friend of Dhrtarastra, and with him was Radha, his beautiful and pious spouse. She was wrapt in deep sorrow, because no son had been given to her. On the river she saw the basket, which the waves carried close to her on the shore; she showed it to Azirath, who went and drew it forth from the waves.” The two take care of the boy and raise him as their own child.

Kunti later on marries King Pandu, who is forced to refrain from conjugal intercourse by the curse that he is to die in the arms of his spouse. But Kunti bears three sons, again through divine conception, one of the children being born in the cave of a wolf. One day Pandu dies in the embrace of his second wife. The sons grow up, and at a tournament which they arrange, Karna appears to