Speaking the Language of Canaan:
The Old Testament and the Israelite Perception of the Physical World

How the Scriptures Appropriate Non-Hebraic World Views

Dennis Bratcher

I. Issues and Assumptions

A. The Issue in Context

I will confess at the outset that I am an avid reader of fantasy and science fiction writing. I began in Junior High School reading Jules Verne and Jonathan Swift, then graduated to Isaac Asimov and C.S. Lewis. I suppose it was inevitable that I would became a devoted *Star Trek* fan. I eventually figured out that this form of literature and drama intrigued me because of the satirical nature of the genre.

Satire, which is the true genre of most fantasy, is about the human condition, aspects of human experience shared by everyone of all cultures and all times. Satire is a safe and effective means of addressing the folly, prejudices, injustices, and outright corruption of political systems, social mores, and individuals. Yet beyond and beneath the specifics of the metaphors and symbols of fantasy, once understood, is the common experience of humanity.

1. words, meanings, and world views

There is a fascinating episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* that deals with the interrelationship between history, culture, and communication. The crew of the *Enterprise* encountered an alien race of people with whom they could not communicate. They could understand all of the words spoken, but the words made no sense. As the plot unfolded, Captain Picard learned that the aliens' language was built of only brief metaphorical references to stories from their cultural heritage. A simple phrase, which only named a person and a place or an action, evoked a whole range of meanings associated with the event.

For example, "Juliet, on the balcony" in our context could be a metaphorical reference for love, loyalty, and devotion drawn from Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*. Even understanding the words, the phrase has no meaning apart from the original story. To understand the meaning of the words, a person must understand the function of the phrase in the narrative history of a culture, as told in a specific story with specific images. And yet, the images evoke a basic experience and set of emotions shared by all humanity. The *Star Trek* episode concluded with Captain Picard reading ancient Greek epics, observing that a knowledge of cultural heritage preserved in ancient stories might help him better communicate in his modern (future) world.

The story is fantasy. But the point stands. All communication must occur within a frame of reference. Knowing all the words does not necessarily mean that communication or understanding will occur. For there to be communication, both parties must operate with some shared assumptions and a common frame of reference. Or, in the case of Captain Picard, one party must learn enough about the assumptions of the other in order to understand the frame of reference and move beyond the words to the meaning.

It is these shared assumptions about the world and human existence in it that make up world view. James Sires has defined world view as ". . . a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or unconsciously) about the basic makeup of the world." [1] This set of presuppositions is usually adopted from the culture in which a person lives. World view, on a large scale, deals with the most basic issues of life.

What is the nature of the physical world? What is ultimately real (gods, matter, etc.)? What is the nature of humanity? What is the basis of right conduct? What is the meaning of human existence? [2] How answers to these questions are expressed in any society, and what language symbols and metaphors are used to express them, depends both on the particular world view held combined with the cultural heritage of the society. For our purposes in this paper, the term "world view" will include not just those presuppositions about the world, but also the language symbols used to express them. In fact, I will focus more narrowly on the language symbols than the underlying tenants of the world view itself.

2. the questions

This brings us to the heart of the topic of this paper. Do we automatically assume that because we understand the words of Scripture (after they have been translated into English) we also understand the meaning? Is the language and world view presented in the Bible God's language and world view, written by God himself, and therefore an absolute truth? If so, does that mean that all of Scripture must be read absolutely literally? Or should we ask what the frame of reference and world view from which the biblical writers spoke might have been? How do we decide when the biblical writers are using symbol and metaphor? Do the writers of scripture use language symbols and cultural metaphors that are immediately translatable into our world view? Or is our modern perception of the world so different that the ancient stories are totally untranslatable and therefore irrelevant to us?

Is it possible to understand enough of the biblical writers' frame of reference and context to understand their meaning? Is there anything particularly sacred or absolute about their world view that compels us to adopt it as our own? Or was it simply a common cultural heritage shared by other peoples of the ancient world and appropriated by the Israelites and the early church? And if so, wherein lies the uniqueness of Scripture as the word of God? And how does all of this relate to our modern, Western, American, 21st century, scientifically-oriented frame of reference, world view and set of cultural metaphors?

The problem is especially acute in Old Testament Scriptures, because in most places the cultural context is far more alien to us than in the New Testament. As a result, we are more conscious of the incongruity between the ancient Israelite perception of the world and our own. We *want* to believe the Old Testament, because it is Scripture of the Church, or at least our faith confessions say that it is. Yet there are places where, because of our modern world view, we find it difficult to believe.

From our understanding of the physical world and our ideas of motion and inertia, how can the sun stand still and not disrupt the entire solar system and destroy the earth itself (Josh 10:12-15)? How can we account for the volume of water necessary to cover the entire surface of the earth to a depth of over 5 miles (Gen 6-7)? How can long-buried bones revive a dead corpse (1 Kings 13:20-21)? How can there be plants flourishing before there was a sun (Gen 1:11-19)?

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[1] James Sires, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World-View Catalog*, InterVarsity Press, 1976, 17.

[2] James Sires, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World-View Catalog*, InterVarsity Press, 1976, 18.

Too often, people adopt responses that fail to deal with the questions. They may respond that since God is doing it, and since he can do anything, there is no problem. Others may reject the Old Testament stories as mere superstition, while others reject the scientific world view and adopt a near magical perspective, or develop a sophisticated intellectual schizophrenia that allows them to function in one world at church and another world the rest of the time. The issue is especially critical for people of faith who accept the validity of work in the Natural Sciences where it seems the world views are irreconcilable.

B. The Nature of Scripture

Of course, an underlying issue here is the nature and character of Scripture. There are a host of issues that could, and properly should, be addressed here, ranging from theories of inspiration of Scripture (see Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture) to philosophical assumptions about the nature of God and the extent of His activity in the world. But given the limited scope of this presentation, I will only briefly touch on the issues, mainly to establish my own assumptions and frame of reference in addressing some of the questions.

1. fundamentalism and inerrancy

The influence of fundamentalism, and its accompanying doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, is pervasive in evangelical circles of the church (see The Modern Inerrancy Debate). Many of the issues in the relationship between science and religion in our tradition arise from this context. The influence of the doctrine of inerrancy, mixed with the anti-intellectualism that emerged in some parts of the American religious scene in the 1920s, and the other-worldly emphasis picked up from the millenarian movements of the late 19th century, has fermented to produce a strange concoction of beliefs in the Church of the Nazarene, as well as other traditions. This phenomenon of inerrancy has been adequately documented by church historians, so I will not elaborate here. The important point to understand is that the doctrine of inerrancy that emerges from fundamentalism has its roots in Calvinism and Reformed theology, with all of the philosophical presuppositions that accompany that doctrinal system.

I cannot debate the issue of inerrancy here. For our purposes, I will simply reject the idea of the inerrancy of Scriptures, along with most of the philosophical assumptions that drive it, as incompatible with a thoroughly Wesleyan theological perspective. [3] One of the basic assertions of a Wesleyan stance is that God actually works with human beings, allowing them a degree of autonomy through His prevenient grace. If we take this seriously as a theological principle, it must affect how we view Scripture. The content and message of Scripture reveals God and His relationship to human beings and the world. But the form of that Scripture, the language, the words, the historical, religious, and cultural contexts, and therefore the cultural metaphors, are human. It is God's word, but in human words. And it is those human words that we read in Scripture.

2. language, symbol, and theology

All language is metaphorical. Whether a language is alphabetically or phonetically based as in most modern languages, pictorially based as in some ancient and eastern languages, unwritten as in some remote dialects even today, or composed of motions as in sign language for the deaf, the basic elements of the language (word, pictograph, sign) represent something. They stand for a thing, an idea, an action or a set of relationships. The words, word clusters, and phrases function as symbols for those ideas and relationships.

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[3] Here I need to make clear that Wesleyan theology in and of itself does not demand a certain set of philosophical assumptions, nor does it demand the rejection of certain systems of thought. Many in the Wesleyan tradition have held the same set of assumptions as those in opposing traditions. The point is that for me, in my understanding of the basic aspects of a Wesleyan system, especially the concept of prevenient grace and human freedom/responsibility that results, the classical Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophical systems upon which Calvinistic and Reformed theology is based does not lend itself to articulating the essential elements of that Wesleyan view. For a more detailed presentation of the perspectives on Scripture that lie behind this view, see The Modern Inerrancy Debate, Revelation and Inspiration: The Foundation in Scripture)

Perhaps it is easier to speak of the symbolic nature of language from the perspective of mathematics, the natural sciences, or even from areas of the humanities than from theology. For example, chemists use a technical language[4] of symbols to describe the processes of interaction between various substances. Physicists and mathematicians use symbols to describe an amazing array of relationships between objects and processes. And the poet is well trained in the use of images of one kind to evoke a response in a different domain.

The premise of the *Star Trek* episode is valid here. To understand language, for it to be communication, I must know the frame of reference for the symbols of that language. Without a frame of reference, an understanding of the context of the symbols, I will not know how to understand the symbol. I may see the symbol K. A chemist would immediately think of Potassium. But a sailor would think of a unit of speed, a knot. A jeweler would think of caret, a chess player would think of a King or a knight, a linguist would think of a certain sound, or lack of one, a statistician might think of the 11th unit in a sequence, and a computer programmer would think of units of data. I would probably first think of the King City Glass Works in King City, Indiana, because K is the embossing on glass insulators made there, which I happen to collect. But you would need to know something about me and my immediate frame of reference to understand my appropriation of the symbol in that way.

If the point here about language and symbol is valid, then it applies to theological language and theological symbols as well. [5] Whatever else it may be, the Bible is theological language. It communicates something about God, about humanity, and about humanity's relationship to God. Because of this understanding of the language of the Bible, I am not a literalist in interpreting Scripture. The words and the symbols of biblical language, and of theology, communicate truth, but they are not the truth themselves.

Unlike the natural sciences, the danger in theological language, especially when we are considering Scripture, is that the language symbols used to communicate theology can be allowed to become ends in themselves and take on a life, a reality, of their own. This is the value of asking our questions about world view. If we can come to an understanding of the frame of reference and context of the language, and so better understand how the language images of the Bible work, perhaps we can better understand the *message*, the theology, which the language, the symbols, the metaphors of language are expressing.

3. imaging history

Unlike most aspects of our modern world view, with its complicated development from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the emergence of a technologically oriented culture, the world view of the Bible is not preoccupied with data. It is rooted in the faith confession that God entered human history and interacted with humanity in a significant way. But the events, the history of the Bible, are not reported as data points, as facts to be processed into some practical application or accumulated as a contribution to tracing the causes and effects of a positivistic world view. The community has already processed the events and the history is told as story.

Even when it emerges in a more reflective, even philosophical, form as in the Old Testament wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, etc.), the story uses language images and cultural symbols, not to reproduce the data of the event, but to communicate the significance, impact, and meaning of the events for the ongoing community. The history emerges in the Bible as theological confession and witness. [6] Biblical history is not just reported, it is imaged. That is, it is retold in the images created by language drawing on the cultural milieu and heritage of the writer and using the cultural symbols of that milieu as the vehicle for talking about God (theology).

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[4] There is clearly a difference between language as the specific ways in which sounds and words are combined to produce speech common to a particular group, as the English *language*, and the more general sense in which I am using *language* here to emphasize any means of communication through symbols. However, the difference is more one of degree than of substance; the former is a more specialized aspect of the latter.

[5] Here I am using "theology" is a non-technical sense simply to refer to "talk about God," which is the basic meaning of the word.

[6] This dimension is emphasized in two of the Gospels: Luke 1:1-2, John 20:30-31, 21:24-25.

II. Old Testament Scriptures in Cultural Context

Having outlined the issues and assumptions and set a general framework within which to proceed, we may now turn to the biblical traditions themselves to understand how the Scriptures appropriate non-hebraic world views. At the outset, there is a problem with phrasing the topic this way. Exactly what is a "Hebraic" world view and how should it be defined? And to what extent does a Hebraic world view differ from, say, a Canaanite or a Babylonian world view?

This is likewise a complex issue, so we can only make some superficial observations. For the moment we will simply assume that there *is* something unique and identifiable about the Hebraic world view, and return to the issue later. However, rather than focusing on the unique aspects of Hebraic culture and world view, for the topic of this paper our preliminary discussion has led in the direction of looking at aspects of Israelite culture shared by surrounding peoples as a profitable means to understand aspects of Old Testament Scripture.

A. The Appropriation of Culture

1. the cultural pool of the ancient Middle East

Biblical historians tell us that we should not assume that the uniqueness of the Hebrews or Israelites lay in their distinctiveness from surrounding Middle Eastern peoples *on the level of culture*. [7] While the Israelites came to a radically new understanding of God, His relationship to the world, and human beings' place in that world, the Israelites shared much of their culture and cultural heritage with surrounding peoples. There was a large common "pool" of culture and cultural metaphors. [8]

In the realm of religion, for example, many of the peoples of the ancient Middle East shared the same gods and the same myths about those gods. The details of the stories and the names of the gods changed between ancient Sumer, Akkad, and later Babylon, or between Phoenicia, Assyria, and Aram. [9] But the essential elements of the stories, and the basic world views they expressed, were remarkably similar. Israelite law codes provide an example from the social sphere. While in many respects the Israelite Torah differed from, for example, the Code of Hammurabi of Babylon, there are enough points of contact to reveal a certain degree of shared concerns from a shared cultural perspective (see Israel's Codes of Conduct Compared to Surrounding Nations).

There is also evidence from the historical side. The Israelites not only lived in the midst of Canaanite culture, a certain number of them *were* originally Canaanites or were native to the environment of Palestine. [10] So it seems likely, and there is little in the biblical traditions which would dispute the fact, that

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[7] William A. Irwin, "The Hebrews," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, University of Chicago Press, 1972 [1946], 224ff.

[8] There are no surviving texts from the Canaanite culture that the Israelites replaced in Palestine. Most of our information comes from archaeological excavations and from the Old Testament itself. However, large numbers of texts have been discovered in Syria (Ugarit), Assyria (Nineveh), and Babylon (Sumerian and Akkadian), as well as Egypt. These texts describe religious myths, beliefs, and practices that correspond very closely in significant details to the Israelite characterization of Canaanite religion presented in the Old Testament. We can also trace the similarity in law codes, customs, building practices, etc. Walter Beyerlin, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating To the Old Testament*, Westminster, 1978 [1975], 185, *passim*.

[9] For example: **Sumer**, 18th century BC, An, Enlil, Ninhursanga (Heaven, Air, Earth); **Akkad**, 12th century BC, Marduk, Enlil, Tiamat; **Ugarit** (Ras Shamra), 13th century BC, El, Ashirat, Baal (Hadd or Hadad), Anat; **Hittite/Hurrian**, 13th century BC, Teshub, Kumarbi; **Sidon**, 5th century BC, Eshmun (Gk: Asclepius), Astarte; **Tyre**, 5th century BC, Baal Melqart (Gk: Heracles); **Carthage**, 5th century BC, Baal Hammon, Tanit; **Damascus**, eighth century BC, Baal Shamamin, Shamash, Shahar (Lord of Heaven, Sun, Moon); **Babylon**, 9th -5th century BC, Marduk, Ishtar. Ancient Sumerian and Akkadian texts name over 3,000 deities. Walter Beyerlin, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating To the Old Testament*, Westminster, 1978 [1975], 69, *passim*.

[10] Norman Gottwald has postulated that the great majority of "Israelites" that emerged in the period of the Davidic monarchy were actually disenfranchised Canaanites who rebelled from the overlords of the city states of Palestine and joined a core group of escaped slaves in a battle for freedom (Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*). Even without accepting this hypothesis, there is biblical evidence that at least some Canaanites, as well as some Africans from Egypt, joined the Israelites as they moved into Canaan. This would partly explain the recurrent problem with the worship of Baal and other non-Israelite deities. See Josh 9, Exod 12:38, Num

the Israelites moved in this cultural milieu and drew from its stock of metaphors, language symbols, customs, and, to some degree, its world view.

2. the growth of Israelite community

As the Israelite community emerged in the twelfth century BC they did not simply create a new culture from whole cloth. The escaped Hebrew slaves, the Egyptians who left with them, and various groups, including Canaanites, who joined them in route to Canaan or after they settled in the land, brought with them social conventions, mores, customs, and a world view (or views). So, for example, when the Israelites began sacrificing to Yahweh in the desert, they were appropriating a ritual practiced by virtually every group of people in the ancient world. But they gave the symbol added content, because they sacrificed to **Yahweh** and celebrated a new understanding of deity. And they did it as people of God so that the symbol became a means of doing theology.

The same is true of the Passover festival. Originally there were two distinct ancient festivals celebrating the spring birthing of livestock (Passover) and the planting of crops (Feast of Unleavened Bread). Passover emerges in later Israelite tradition, on one level as a celebration of God's deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, and on another level as a confession that God enters the arena of human history and reveals himself to human beings. The ancient pagan rituals were appropriated as vehicles for confessing the Israelites' understanding of God. The same could be said of other familiar "Israelite" institutions such as circumcision, the priesthood, the temple, and the yearly festival cycle. As the community grew and matured through time, the origins of the symbols became more and more obscure and more distinctly Israelite. Yet, that does not alter the fact that their origin lay in Canaanite culture.

B. Mythical Images in Scripture

Beyond the elements of social culture and convention that the Israelites shared with other peoples, there is also a whole range of broader and less easily defined conventions. These are the conventions of thought, what we might call in our context a philosophical framework for thinking and articulating abstract ideas.

Most peoples of the ancient world, including Canaanites (and the Romans of New Testament time), viewed the world from the perspective of myth. Contrary to what I have often heard from the pulpit, the term "myth" as used here does not mean "false" or "fiction." Even in my old and yellowed Webster's, "fiction" is the *third* meaning of the word. [11] In its primary and more technical meaning "myth" refers to a story or group of stories that serve to explain how a particular society views their world. The stories of myth often deal with phenomena of the physical world for which the culture does not have an adequate explanation. Or they may deal with human actions and emotions that are potentially valuable or destructive for the community. Myth is a means by which a society can express its collective experience of the world, with the fear, frustration, anxiety, and promise that it holds. [12]

The myth is also the technique by which the society comes to terms with the world in which it lives and tries to make sense out of it. For example the Oedipus myth of Greek culture attempts to verbalize, and condemn, the sexual attraction between a parent and child. The deities of myth are usually little more than the forces of nature or traits of human beings personified. Often the gods of myth are simply human beings writ large whose actions on a cosmic level produce effects in the physical world. Sexual union of the gods, for example, produces the fertility of the earth to grow crops. The means by which humans affect a world construed in myth is magic. The magic used to control the world is usually expressed in two ways. Either

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11:4. Also, scholars have suggested that the lack of battles fought in the central highlands of Samaria as the Israelites entered the land is evidence that clan members related to the Israelites remained in this area during the several centuries-long Egyptian sojourn of Abraham's family.

[11] *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, The Southwestern Company, 1962, 495.

[12] H. and H. A. Frankfort, "Myth and Reality," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, University of Chicago Press, 1972 [1946], 3-27.

people imitate the activity of the gods thereby causing them to perform a desired action. Or they appease the gods by some act, such as sacrifice, to put them in a good frame of mind so they will respond in the desired way.

1. the Ba'al myth and the physical world

The most prevalent mythical system in the immediate Canaanite context of Israelite culture was the myth of Ba'al. [13] As with most myths, the entire story is complex, varying in details and emphasis between peoples. The basic features, however, are fairly simple. Ba'al religion revolved around the cycles of nature necessary for survival in the ancient world, primarily growing crops or raising livestock. Not surprisingly, in an arid and agriculturally marginal area of the world, the fertility of land and crops played a large role in Canaanite world view. And also as expected, water was a major element of the myth and its images.

We do not have time here to go into much detail concerning the Ba'al myth and its counterparts. What we know of the basic elements of the myth actually comes from two groups of texts. [14] The Babylonian creation hymn, *Enuma Elish*, describes a great battle among the gods, [15] primarily between Marduk, the champion of the gods, and Tiamat, the primeval ocean or the "deep." Sometimes Tiamat is portrayed as a great serpentine beast, the dragon of chaos or the dragon of the sea. Marduk overcame Tiamat and her forces and after splitting her body into two parts, made the sky, stars, sun, and moon from one half, and the earth from the other. From the blood of Tiamat's defeated husband Kingu, one of the lesser gods, Ea (Enki) then created humanity to be servants of the gods so they would never have to work again. Marduk continued to bring order into the chaos caused by Tiamat, setting each of the astral deities in their place in the heavens and establishing the cycles of nature. Marduk continued to bring order into the chaos caused by Tiamat, setting each of the astral deities in their place in the heavens and establishing the cycles of nature. [16]

This theme of a cosmic battle among the gods personifies the struggle for life. It describes the annual renewal of the earth in springtime; it is a myth of the cycle of seasons. This cosmic battle was not understood as a historical event of the past, but occurred anew each year and was reenacted in cultic ritual. Marduk represents the forces of order, the coming of spring with its renewal of life and the end of the reign of the chaos and death of winter. Marduk is the spring sun that gives life and renewed energy to the earth. Tiamat represents those forces that threaten human existence, the threat of a disordered world in which springtime never comes. The ancient theme of an original primeval ocean that threatens to break out and engulf the world in killing salt water is also seen in Tiamat. Creation, in Babylonian thinking, was an ongoing struggle between order and chaos, a way of thinking no doubt related to the uncertainties of life in the ancient world.

The second group of texts comes from Ugarit, in northern Syria. They are chiefly concerned with the emergence of Ba'al as the leader of the gods. Basically, Ba'al was the storm god, the bringer of rain, and thus fertility, to the land. There was rivalry among the gods and a struggle erupted between Yamm, the sea, and Ba'al, the rain. With the help of his sister Anat, the goddess of war, and Astarte, the goddess of earth and fertility, Ba'al defeated Yamm, and his cohorts, Tannin, the dragon of the sea, and Loran (or Lothan, cf. Isa 27:1), the serpent with seven heads. The gods began to build a magnificent house for Ba'al so that he could be at rest and provide abundant rain for the earth. But Ba'al was challenged by Mot (or Mut), the god

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[13] Again noting that there are no surviving texts from Canaanite culture. The most complete text of the Ba'al myth comes from Ugarit.

[14] Space prohibits dealing with the equally interesting *Epic of Gilgamesh* or the earlier *Atrahasis Epic*, both of which contain stories in which water threatens to re-engulf the world. Walter Beyerlin, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating To the Old Testament*, Westminster, 1978 [1975], 89-97.

[15] This mythical battle, called a *theogony*, is a recurring theme in most mythical systems from ancient Greece and Rome to modern popular Hinduism.

[16] Pierre Grimal, ed., *Larousse World Mythology*, Chartwell Books, 1976 [1965], 63-70; Walter Beyerlin, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating To the Old Testament*, Westminster, 1978 [1975], 80-84.

of death and the underworld. Mot temporarily triumphed and Ba'al disappeared into the underworld. Anat and Shapash, the sun god, found Ba'al, brought him back to life, and restored him to his house. [17]

This series of stories is even more clearly, especially in its details, an agrarian myth personifying the cycle of rainy and dry seasons of the Middle East. Like the *Enuma Elish*, these texts deal with the danger inherent in drought and ensuing famine. The disappearance of rain in the dry season (Ba'al's descent into the underworld) portended catastrophe if it did not return in the Spring.

But this myth is more explicitly concerned with fertility, specifically cast in terms of human sexuality. Worship of Ba'al involved imitative magic, the performance of rituals, including sacred prostitution, which were understood to bring vitality to Ba'al in his struggle with Mot. It takes little imagination to see the connection between the human sexual act and rain watering the earth to produce fruit. It is interesting to note in passing that the biblical traditions use these same agrarian images of being fruitful or barren to describe vitality in humans beings.

The emphasis here is not on the order of the world, but on the necessity of rain. The needed water cannot be the unrestrained water of flood or the lifeless salt water of Yamm (the Sea). It must be life-giving rain, falling at the proper time. Ba'al is often portrayed as "Rider of the Clouds," and described in imagery associated with storms and meteorological phenomena, including clouds, thunder, lightning, and hail. The myth gives assurance of some stability in the physical world, assisted by humans in their service to the gods, which would allow continued human existence.

2. poetic images and the language of creation

Since the Israelites shared the cultural milieu of the Middle East, it would not be surprising, as pervasive as these myths were in that area, that they would use some of this imagery. The creation narratives in Genesis 1, for example, draw from the images of chaos and the primeval ocean associated with the Babylonian myth, although without the cosmic battle of the gods.

The "deep" (Heb: *tehom*), which has cultural parallels in both Tiamat and Yamm, is formless and void. By the "breath" of God, he brings order into this formless water. We may speak philosophically of *ex nihilo* creation (creation out of nothing) as a logical necessity, but in Genesis 1 the images are of God as a bringer of order. The creative activity in Genesis 1 is concerned with setting limits and boundaries, bringing order into the chaos. The idea of "separating" is a recurring one. Boundaries are set between light and darkness, between earth and sky, between sea and dry land, between the waters above and the waters below. Boundaries are also set for living things; plants and animals only produce after their kinds (see The Cultural Context of Ancient Israel and God and Boundaries: Genesis 1:1-2:25).

It is this sense of order that leads to unusual laws in Israel, such as the prohibition against sowing two kinds of seeds in the same field or wearing clothing made of two different kinds of material (Deut 22:9-11). If the mythic images are taken seriously here, creation emerges not as a static and self-sustaining system, but as dynamic, sustained by the ongoing activity of God. Unlike the myths, however, God does not need the magical assistance of human beings to sustain the world. Genesis 1 is not about the world and creation; it is about God the Creator and Sustainer of the world.

The Genesis 2-3 account is slightly different in focus. It emphasizes by the use of rain, mist, and rivers the life giving necessity of water on the earth brought by God. But the real focus of the story is the creature *adam* who had understood the boundaries and limits of God's creation and yet violated them thereby bringing disruption and chaos into the harmonious order of God's world. The chaos comes not because of a battle between the gods but because of human sinfulness (see A Literary Analysis of Genesis 2:4-3:24).

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[17] Pierre Grimal, ed., *Larousse World Mythology*, Chartwell Books, 1976 [1965], 86-92; Walter Beyerlin, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating To the Old Testament*, Westminster, 1978 [1975], 185-221.

However, the serpent imagery may well have its origin in the recurring theme of the dragon of chaos. It is interesting to note that in the book of Revelation (12:1-13:9), the only place in the Bible where the serpent of Genesis 3 is identified with the satan and the devil, both are also identified with the red dragon that causes upheavals in the entire order of the universe (12:4), along with the dragons of the sea that disrupt the world and human society (13:1ff). It is also interesting that the dragon devil uses a flood of water from his mouth to pursue humanity, in the figure of the woman and her child (12:15-17).

These images of chaos and order show up in a variety of other places in the biblical traditions. Probably the most striking use of the imagery is in the prophets as they use the idea to warn the people of impending judgment. Jeremiah (4:23-28), using the phrase "formless and void," warns of God's punishment on the nation of Judah for her sins. The images are of a world gone totally awry in which mountains move, there is no sun, no water, and no life. God will simply withdraw His presence and the world will collapse back into primeval chaos.

Chaos is a major concern in the Flood story (Gen 6-9) where the sinful actions of humanity have brought a disruption into the world, described in terms of water engulfing the earth. It is crucial to note, however, that the water, contrary to the eastern myths, is not in rebellion against God but responds to His will.

Isaiah (34:8-17) also describes the "day of Yahweh's vengeance" in which chaos and confusion will come to the people, accompanied by water turning to fire and earth become brimstone. Interestingly, in this passage also are rare Old Testament references to mythical Canaanite "demons," the satyr and Lilith, the storm god of the desert (see Demons in the Old Testament).

Joel, using a devastating locust plague that threatened the produce of the land as a symbol of God's wrath on sin, also tapped into this imagery of chaos: the sun and stars cease to shine, the moon becomes blood, the earth burns, and the sky moves. It is significant that when Joel wanted to speak of God's forgiveness and hope for the future, he used images of rain, abundant fresh water, and fertility of the ground (1:21-27, 3:18).

In exilic Isaiah, written to encourage the people following the exile, creation language is abundant. In Isaiah 45:18-19, in a deliberate play on the earlier warnings, the writer promised that God would continue to act as Creator to avoid the chaos and to establish a stable world for his people after the exile. These images of cataclysm emerge as the standard way of talking about God's judgment, later becoming the stock of images used in apocalyptic writings such as Revelation.

The idea of God the Creator as the bringer of order also appears extensively in Psalms and in the Wisdom traditions. The psalmic creation hymns often portray the Creator God in terms of the order and stability of the world: the sun keeps its course (19:4b-6), the waters are contained (33:7), the pillars supporting the earth are solid (75:3), the rains come on time (66; 147:8), the crops grow (104:14ff), even the animal world follows set patterns (105:20:23). This stability is a frequent topic of wisdom writings, as in the "times" of Ecclesiastes (3:1-9).

There are many passages, chiefly from the Psalms, which portray God in images from the Ba'al myth. Yahweh speaks from the mighty waters, His voice lightning and His words thunder (Psa 29; 104:7). Frequently, God is described as shooting flashing arrows from the heavens as He rides in a chariot in the clouds (Psa 76:3-9; 77:16-20; 97:1-5; 104:1-4; cf. Hab 3:4-9). He has smashed the head of the sea dragon (Levithian, Rahab) and established the boundaries of the earth (Psa 74:12-17; 89:10; 104:5-9; 148:6; cf. Isa 27:1ff; Job 26:12-13). It is Yahweh alone who rules over the waters of the deep and controls the raging of the sea (Heb: *yam*; Psa 77:16; 89:5-13; 93:3-4).

Clearly, the biblical traditions, when they want to speak of the physical world and express God's relation to it, draw on the cultural idiom of the language of Canaan. However, it is equally clear that the Israelites understood the difference between using the images to speak of God's world and adopting the images as

truth. Some did take the images themselves as truth and succumbed to the worship of Ba'al as another deity. But they were always condemned in biblical tradition as distorting the proper worship of God.

3. Yahweh, the divine warrior, and the language of theophany

We have discussed the mythical images of Canaanite culture in relation to biblical creation language. Another significant use of these images from Canaanite culture is in salvation language of the Old Testament. In the understanding of God acting in history to reveal Himself to humanity, Israel makes the most decisive break with her cultural neighbors. But again, it is not on the level of language, the surface level of the images, or even in the understanding of the physical world depicted, but on a deeper level of the background and content of the metaphorical language.

The paradigmatic event in Israel's history was the exodus, specifically the crossing of the Sea of Reeds (see The *Yam Suph*: Red Sea or Sea of Reeds?). Since this event involved water, there is a natural connection with the myths of ancient Middle Eastern culture. [18] The Song of the Sea, following the Reed Sea incident (Exod 15:1-21), is one of the oldest writings in the Old Testament, and draws on the imagery of the conquest of Yamm (Sea). Yahweh is portrayed as a mighty warrior doing battle for His people (v. 3; cf Psa 24:8). While there are historical references to Pharaoh and his army, the battle itself is described in relation to the sea. The deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians was effected by Yahweh's control of the sea, the waters, the floods, and the deep. Israel remembered the deliverance as a historical event. Yet when they described it, they used the language of Canaan, the poetic images common to the cultural milieu of the day (note Psa 77:16-20).

The event itself became a paradigm, a metaphorical way to confess God as Deliverer and Savior. Likewise, the poetic language used to depict the event also took on a larger symbolic function. The "coming" of God for the salvation of His people, cast in images of the Divine Warrior marching at the head of the heavenly armies, became a conventional way of referring to God and His activity in the world. This emerged in a special literary form called a theophany, in which the presence of Yahweh among His people was depicted in images rooted in the Ba'al myths. [19]

A typical example is the hymn of Habakkuk 3. There Yahweh marches from the southern desert riding upon the storm clouds. Pestilence (Heb: *derek*) and Plague (Heb: *resheph*), known elsewhere as the Canaanite deities Derek and Resheph, march at His side. With lightning flashing from his hands, He comes for the salvation/deliverance of His people. While Habakkuk is writing at the time of the Babylonian invasion, Yahweh's foes are Nahar, Yam, and Tehom, the river, the sea, and the deep.

Although the literary form of a theophany can be varied, other theophanies exhibit similar references to clouds, lightning, thunder, gloom and darkness, and heavenly armies or assemblies of the heavenly court (Exodus 19; Psa 77:16-20). The Israelite writers exhibited a great deal of creativity in theophanies, and some of the images may have origins elsewhere. Yet, there are enough overtones of the mythical metaphors to see some contact with the stock of cultural metaphors of surrounding culture.

As already noted, it is likely that the images of chaos and cosmic struggle in the Ba'al myths, mediated through the metaphorical language of theophany, also emerge in the highly stylized and symbolic language of apocalyptic, represented in Old Testament by the book of Daniel and in the New Testament by the book of Revelation. While the specific origin of many of the symbols of apocalyptic writings cannot be traced, several basic elements, including the struggle between God and the dragon, the images of fire, cloud (smoke), and water, and cataclysmic upheavals in the physical world, have a common background in Canaanite and Middle Eastern culture.

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[18] See F. M. Cross, "The Song of the Sea and Canaanite Myth," in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 113-120.

[19] See Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology*, Harper and Row, 1983, 63-152.

Some of these images, especially the cosmic battle waged for control of the world, translate well from their Semitic origins into the more dualistic thought world of the inter-testamental period and the early church. Unfortunately, in our day, many have again taken the metaphors themselves as truth and understand the Christian life in terms of this ancient cosmic battle between God and the dragon of chaos. This explains the popularity of "spiritual warfare" language current in some circles of the Church today.

III. Believing the Old Testament in the Twenty-First Century

We now return to our original questions and perhaps are ready to consider some answers. One thing remains to be considered, however. We have noted the ancient Israelites' way of talking about their world and about God. In summary, we need to compare the ancient world's way of speaking with the way we talk about our world and about God as we near the twenty-first century.

A. Ancient and Modern Perceptions of the World

1. the reign of myth and magic

Apart from Israel, the ancient world was dominated by myth and magic, which explained how the world functioned and how human beings related to it. The myths grew out of experience, but were actually a means of articulating speculative thought about the world. [20] The myths revealed a way of thinking that saw the world as the embodiment of personal forces that could be controlled or manipulated by human actions. The myths were not concerned with data, natural "laws," or absolutes. They were only concerned with establishing order and stability for the survival of life. Nothing else was necessary to explain human existence beyond the activity of the gods on some cosmic level, because the gods and the world were essentially the same thing (see chart on the Comparison of World Views, Myth).

2. the reign of naturalism and positivism

Our modern world, at least in Western, 20th century society, is largely dominated by rationalistic approaches that deal only with data, empirical observation, and processes that are more or less self-sustaining. We call these processes "natural law," although there is an increasing awareness that this label may not be totally adequate. [21] This naturalistic view sees the world only in terms of a sequence of causes and effects (positivism); it is a closed system that needs no outside "interference" to operate. Nothing else is necessary to explain human existence beyond the operation of the laws of nature on a physical level, because the gods do not exist and the cosmos is self-contained (see chart on the Comparison of World Views, Naturalism/Positivism).

B. Myth, Symbol, and Mythopoetic Language

1. myth, ancient and modern

I would suggest that the naturalistic view of the world, whether it emerges in historical positivism, philosophical deism, or atheistic empiricism, is just as mythical in the technical sense as is the *Enuma Elish* or the Baʻal myth. It assumes that one way of looking at the physical world is the only way, and that one set

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[20] This is the conclusion of the Frankforts in H. and H. A. Frankfort, "The Emancipation of Thought from Myth," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: As Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, University of Chicago Press, 1972 [1946], 363-388.

[21] There is much debate about the development and transition to a "post-modern" perspective that is less rationalistic, less concerned with self sustaining processes, and that is more aware of spontaneity and random event. This has led, especially in scientific circles to talk more about the processes by which events occur rather than the final cause for them according to a definable "natural law." This perspective may (or may not) mark a transition to a new world view. However, there is sufficient diversity in the perspectives right now to describe them generally as falling somewhere in a range between theism (emphasizing a certain external cause), deism (acknowledging some external cause), to naturalism (the cause resides within the system) whether or not that cause is defined in terms of "natural law".

of metaphors, and one language, is adequate. This ascension of the myth of naturalism and natural law has created the tension that most of us have experienced as we move from our modern world view to the world view of the Scriptures. While this modern myth of immutable natural law is being modified from the perspectives of quantum physics and the theory of random event, there is still a disposition, perhaps a need, to see the world in rational categories, in terms of stability and order. After all, that is a basic premise for most of the work done in the Natural Sciences.

2. religious language: having it both ways

Must we, living in a culture where the way we view our world seems totally at odds with the perspective of ancient Israelite culture, choose one or the other? I think not. I think we can have it both ways! It is here that the Bible can be our greatest ally and can provide a solution rather than being the source of the problem.

I contend that the Israelites borrowed the cultural language of Canaan because that language was the best, perhaps the only, means available to them in their cultural context to articulate observations about the physical world and how God related to that world. There were no other thought categories available to them to describe what we call "natural" processes. In fact, there is no equivalent word in the Hebrew language for what we mean by "nature." The Israelites could not speak of "nature" as a collection of natural forces. They could only speak of God.

Yet, they differed radically from the Canaanites and surrounding cultures by refusing to equate God with the physical world. *They did not use the myths to articulate their understanding of God.* They did that on a historical level and so parted company with the ancient world. But the Israelites did not leave their culture. They did not make radical breakthroughs in observation of the physical world. So they were left with the language of myth by which to speak of the physical world, even when they understood it in terms of creation by God. They used, not the content and assumptions of the myth itself, but the language of myth to confess God's relationship to the physical world as Creator and Deliverer (see chart on the Comparison of World Views, Bible/Mythopoetic).

Understanding this puts us a long ways towards understanding the use of mythical imagery in the Old Testament. In fact, this is probably the single most important point in this paper: **when it address aspects of the physical world, the language of the Old Testament is often the language of Canaan, cast in the images of contemporary Canaanite culture, although the content of those images is informed and transformed by a different understanding of God and his actions in the world**.

The difference in understanding is not on the level of the description of the physical world or the surface levels of the images themselves. On that level, the Israelites were much nearer the mythical world of their Canaanite neighbors than they are to us (see chart on the Comparison of World Views). This helps explain the Israelites' seven hundred year struggle to break free from a syncretistic religion that tried to make the appropriated symbols truth in themselves. On a deeper level, the mythical images of the culture were used in a metaphorical way much as the metaphors functioned in the *Star Trek* episode mentioned earlier. They became in biblical traditions simply the conventions of poetic description, what scholars call mythopoetic language. The difference is in the radically different view of deity and humanity that the poetic images were used to convey.

C. The Dynamics of Tradition, Community, and Culture

1. speaking what must be spoken

As the community of faith, what should we speak to our modern, rationally, scientifically, technologically oriented world? What is it that we need to say about God? What should the Church, the people of God, be expending its energy getting people to believe? The Church, as it has often done in the past, can set itself totally against culture, reject the language of Canaan as too pagan, and create its own closed community with its own system of symbols and metaphors, a language that only the initiated can understand and which

the initiated are required speak. It can haul the Galileos in its midst before the Inquisition and silence them. But that does not erase what we know. Galileo was forced before the Inquisitor to recant his Copernican theories of planetary motion, which held that the earth was not the immovable center of the universe. Legend says that Galileo arose from before the Inquisitor and quietly whispered, "But the earth *does* move."

We must, as people living in the Western world at the end of the second millennium after Christ, live in *our* world. As much as we might like to return to a simpler world, to a biblical world, uncomplicated by the knowledge, the technology, the problems, and the questions of our time, we cannot. We can never be "BC " persons and we can never be first century Christians. We have learned too much about our world in 2,000 years. If we are to be authentic persons, authentic Christians, we must come to terms with our world, not capitulate to it, but learn to function well in it *as Christians*. We must learn to be genuine theists in a way that takes seriously the biblical confession that God is Creator and Sustainer of his creation, and yet also takes seriously what we have come to know about that creation and how it works (see chart on the Comparison of World Views, Theism).

We cannot simply construct a new myth, whether it be magically or rationally based. If we are to retain a dynamic and growing Faith in the twenty-first century, we must learn to articulate that Faith in ways, in symbols, in metaphors, that twenty-first century people can understand. If they do not know the cultural context of our words, the words will have no meaning and our message, our witness to our God, our salvation, our hope for the world runs the risk being unintelligible, or worse rejected as irrelevant. Our Faith will never be totally rational, but it cannot be irrational, and, if Wesleyan tradition is at all correct, it should be reasonable.

2. what language shall we speak?

As Christians, we must speak. Like Jeremiah the prophet, we have a message for the world that if we do not speak, it becomes a burning fire inside us that we cannot shut in. We must speak. But what language shall we speak? What symbols shall we borrow? And who will listen?

If the Israelites could hold a primitive view of the physical world much like their Canaanite neighbors, and yet still affirm Yahweh as Creator, perhaps we should realize that our faith is not finally linked to such matters unless **WE** force it to be. If Israelites thought that the world was flat and floated on the primeval ocean like a lily pad, and could still acknowledge God as Creator, perhaps we can believe that the world is billions of years old or that there is intelligent life on other planets in remote solar systems and still be Christian. If the biblical traditions could appropriate the language of Canaan and "sanctify" it to carry their own faith confessions, perhaps the Church should not be so threatened by science and the language of science when it informs us about our physical world.

I would suggest that we can, and should, as Christians, allow the Natural Sciences their voice in the church. I see nothing in scientific methodology that is inherently alien or threatening to the Christian faith. I see only scientists, as well as theologians, sometimes using their methodology badly. Perhaps we can even appropriate some of this modern language of Canaan in articulating our Faith confessions. We may have to give it added content, shape it to our Faith confessions, even reject some of the presuppositions that inform it. We may have to be more deliberately Wesleyan, even more deliberately Christian, in our thinking.

But in the end, we must learn to speak the language simply because it is the language that our modern world outside the church speaks. After all, the words and the language itself are not truth, they only bear witness to the truth. And I contend that, ultimately, it is the message and the witness Himself who is believed, not just his words. But the words and the language must be understood or no one will even hear the message.