Robert D. Miller

*The Dragon, the Mountain, and the Nations: An Old Testament Myth, Its Origins, and Its Afterlives*

Explorations in Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations 6


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Robert Miller deserves an initial cheer for naming part 3 of his book “Canaanite Epic and Hebrew Myth.” This section is the core of the book, and Miller’s central aim is to describe how the dragon-slaying myth made its way into the Hebrew Bible, primarily the book of Psalms, in order to interpret those texts more clearly.

Before approaching the central question, Miller takes the reader around the ancient world to determine the origins of the dragon-slaying myth and the extent to which it might have been a global phenomenon. The myth is prominent in ancient India, most significantly in the victory of Indra over Vṛtra in the Rig-Veda. Nevertheless, Miller finds the absence of this myth in many places, thus debunking any ideas about a global myth. Most important for the central subject of the book is the lack of any expression of the myth in ancient Egypt. The dragon-slaying myth is more at home in central Eurasia. Miller traces it from Proto-Indo-European civilizations through its Hittite and Hurrian expressions into the literature of Ugarit, a place where biblical scholars may begin to feel a greater sense of familiarity. In the Hittite form, it is already the storm god depicted as a bull who eventually defeats the dragon, and the king is associated with the victorious god. In the Ugaritic version the storm god, Baal, is associated with agriculture, and the dragon this deity slays is connected to the sea. In most expressions of the story, there is some ambiguity about the victory. Either the god is unable to accomplish it on the first try, or the death of the dragon may not be permanent. Thus, the threats the dragon represents—death, infertility, and chaos—persist. Miller seems correct to emphasize the extensive influence of this myth in the Levant and
surrounding areas but ends the discussion with a puzzling statement: “The Baal story was probably known to average Israelites more than any of the other myths explored in this book” (123). I am not sure what an average Israelite is or how we might have access to what such people knew.

Miller begins the discussion of the biblical material with a review of the practice of Baalism in ancient Israel. Even in biblical scholarship, the portrayal of Baalism as an aberration or the result of outside influence still seems common, so such a starting point is necessary. It is in this discussion that the idea of Canaanite epic emerges. Miller finds a change in genre because he views the Baal Epic as narrative poetry, in contrast to the lyric poetry of Psalms. This distinction requires scrutiny, since there are numerous examples of narrative poetry in the book of Psalms. An additional pair of important, related questions emerges as his work with biblical texts gets underway: (1) To what extent can we reconstruct the meta-narratives or back stories that lie behind the Israelite texts in the Bible? (2) How much should we assume the influence of these stories to be present even in texts where none of their elements finds overt expression? The discussion leads to the fascinating claim that “the dragon-slaying myth never achieved ‘narrative canonicity’ in Israel but was confined to poetry, even though it is widespread in that genre” (147). For such a statement to be true, it would need to extend the notion of canon far back into Israel’s past. Did anything have “canonicity” before the Hellenistic period? There is certainly tension between this claim and the earlier one about the Baal story being so well known among Israelites.

The specific work with biblical psalms turns out to be a dense catalogue of observations concerning those in which the reference to the dragon-slaying myth seems likely. The poems Miller works with are Pss 18, 29, 42–49, 65–68, 72–77, 89, 93, and 104. The distinctions between narrative and lyric poetry are not simple and absolute. The samples that test Miller’s assignment of biblical psalms the most are 18, 74, and 89. Psalm 89 tells an important story, the story of Israel as a nation. The myth enters the poem in verses 10–11, which place the ruling of the tempestuous sea in parallel with the crushing of Rahab. The victory over chaos, resulting in God’s rule over the earth as a heavenly king, forms the backdrop for David’s successful reign over Israel. YHWH will crush David’s foes (v. 24) and help him rule over the waters (v. 26). The payoff for focus on the myth is considerable, because when everything comes inexplicably undone in the second half of the poem the singer is at a loss for an explanation. Has the dragon come back to life as Babylon? In recognition of the density of his presentation of the psalms material, Miller sets out to identify “cultural domains” used by biblical writers in poems containing the dragon-slaying myth, proceeding from a list of common elements he calls “variables.” The variables are then grouped into “domains,” the largest of which are “defeat of the sea,” “places God lives,” and “conflicts with people.” This organization of the use of the dragon-slaying myth leads Miller to two ways of reading the social dimensions of this kind of discourse. The first involves the myth’s ability to “reinforce human political power from Zion” (188). The divine defeat of the dragon, representing victory over chaos, establishes the strength of God’s chosen place, from which the human king rules. The second social dimension stands apart from the portrayal of the dragon-slaying myth in its other cultural expressions, outside of Israel.
The gathering of the nations, drawn to Israel by God, is a theme appearing in Pss 47, 66, 68, 72, and 87, among others.

When Miller turns to the remainder of the biblical material, including texts from the larger Old Testament canon and the New Testament, the highlight is his reading of Gen 3 with the dragon-slaying myth in the background. Is the snake/serpent in Eden a dragon? To support his affirmative answer, Miller points to Isa 27:1 and Amos 9:3 as places where שׁחנ refers to a dragon, but these cases are not clear at all. Leviathan is a dragon, and Isa 27:1 calls it a נינן, while it uses שׁחנ to describe the dragon’s movements in a way that might be familiar to readers. The Amos case is even less convincing, where שׁחנ appears to be a snake that lives in the water. Further, the snake in Gen 3 behaves in such strange and unique ways that it is difficult to connect it to any other animal. It talks to the female human, and she talks to it; God also talks to it. This is not the behavior of a snake, but it is not the behavior of a dragon either.

Miller’s conclusions lean heavily on this reading of Gen 3, but removing it would not be fatal. “The biblical narrative is not a narrative of contiguity but a narrative of substitution—Antiochus for Leviathan, or even Pompey for Leviathan in the Psalms of Solomon” (294). The struggle with powerful forces is persistent, even if the identity of the foe and the location of the field of battle shift and move. The challenge to the dragon-slaying myth in the Bible is a rigid monotheism that insists on divine victories so easy that they hardly look like battles at all. At times Miller seems to see this: “Only in the biblical tradition do we get myths where the dragon is reduced to a pet fish” (293). At other times it is not clear: “This is why the Bible does not always reduce Leviathan to a guppy…. The divine warrior is meant to be on the ropes.” I am not sure where this is true. Rather, it appears to be Israel, or Job, or the lamenting singer of Ps 44 who is on the ropes, precisely because Israel’s God has attacked them. Monotheism permits no other powerful foe.

Readers will find useful tools throughout Miller’s work, whether it is the careful development of the background of the dragon-slaying myth in ancient cultures or the myriad observations about biblical texts when examined through this lens. This is a subject that has needed sustained attention. Even where readers may not be convinced by Miller’s arguments, they will find ample material to develop and strengthen their own.