

Response to Micha Ankori

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I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Israeli analyst Micha Ankori's very interesting article "A Mytho-Psychological Study of the Biblical Legacy: Based on Parallels between Jewish Mysticism and Alchemic Art." The article—together with Ankori's and Rabbi Ohad Ezechai's newly published Hebrew book *B'sod Livyatan (The Secret of Leviathan)* (Tel Aviv: Modan, 2004)—constitute a significant contribution to current work on re-visioning and re-imagining through Jungian lenses the relationship between the legacies of the Hebrew Bible and traditional myth. Ankori's article also explicitly adds to the discussion of psychical and historical relationships between Kabbalah and alchemy.

Ankori begins his essay by looking at Jung's and Gershom Scholem's approaches to symbols and myths in psyche and in the traditions of Jewish mysticism. Ankori asserts that both

Jung and Scholem concluded that the symbol is a garb for deep truths inaccessible to the conscious mind, which can only be discovered through symbolic language....Although both Scholem and Jung used almost identical formulations about the essence and contents of the occult, their paths never crossed. Scholem denied any connection between Kabbalah or Hasidism and psychology. Whenever Scholem mentions depth psychology in his writings, he is highly critical and distant, and largely misconstrues it.

I believe that Ankori overstates the case for Scholem's antipathy towards the depth psychological. This remains debatable and of historic interest. In any event, it is clear that more recent academic scholarship is open to and makes use of Jungian and other depth psychological approaches—for instance, the work of Yehudah Liebes, Rachel Elior, Elliott Wolfson, to some degree Moshe Idel, and importantly the recent fascinating study by Alan Brill on the mystical psychology of the 19th-century Hasidic master Reb Zaddok HaCohen, *Thinking God* (New York: Yeshivah University Press, 2002)—which includes a deep and illuminating study on the approach of Reb Zaddok and of his teacher Reb Mordechai Leiner of Izbica to working with dreams.

Ankori moves on to explore the question of whether or not the Hebrew Bible is mythic. He acknowledges that this "is a controversial question" that has divided 20th-century philosophers, psychologists, and academic students of Judaism—a division that continues to the present. He tells us that his

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conclusion, which rests on a psycho-mythological approach, is that the Bible not the Jewish myth and is not really a myth at all. The Bible contains elements that are obviously mythological, but these were included in the text either to object to them or to serve the Bible's aims: allegiance to the divine ethical message. According to the criteria that the psycho-mythological perspective claims are necessary for the existence of myth, the Bible has no myth. For instance, creation in the Bible is the work of a male God, who creates the world alone. But no such myth exists. In every myth, a male and a female god create the world or, at least, male and female elements are partners in the act of creation.

I agree with Ankori's later observation that the "God of the Bible is not a god in the [standard] mythical sense." But I believe that he errs in stating in the paragraph just cited that "the Bible has no myth." A psycho-mythological perspective cannot judge only on the basis of the *content* of narrative material as to the "mythic" or "non-mythic" status of that material. It must also look at the *psychical functions* that the narrative material serves.

The "Bible's aims" are *not* reducible to the rationalistic formulation "allegiance to the divine ethical message," as Micha Ankori asserts. This completely ignores the complex interweaving of ethical injunction with narrative material and most importantly with *ritual material*, both in the Torah proper and throughout the Prophets and the Writings. In my view, the increasing importance of ethical injunction, especially in the later prophetic and wisdom strata of the Hebrew Bible, emerges organically out of the Bible's deepest aim—namely, *to assert the overarching oneness of the One God / One Source of all creation and blessing, while retaining the archetypal psychical functions formerly subsumed by polytheistic myth, through transmuting its mythemes into ritual practices*. I cannot justify my views here because of space considerations, but I refer the interested reader to biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom's deep discussions of the psychical functions of biblical ritual—particularly priestly ritual involving cycles of impurity/purification and contact with the holy—in his extensive commentary to the Book of Leviticus in the Anchor Bible Series (*Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible Series, Doubleday, New York, 1991) as well as to Isaiah Leibowitz's recounting of a conversation he had with the 20th-century mystic Rav A. I. Kuk about the dialectic within Judaism between philosophical and kabbalistic mysticism (in *The Faith of Maimonides*, Mod Books, Tel Aviv, 1989, pp. 37–38). Jon Levenson's *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1988) also includes much relevant material. In sum, my position is that "the 'psychological therapy' that myths provided in other ancient cultures" is indeed present in the Hebrew Bible. It is present not only in the persistence of "idolatry," as Ankori writes, but also and essentially in the ongoing quotidian enactments of biblical ritual. It is also present in the richly mythic narrative sections of, for example, the Book of Genesis. And it persists in continuity with the transmutations of external behavioral ritual into interior psycho-spiritual practices, which emerge out of biblical priestly ritual in the immediate post-biblical era [see Rachel Elijor, *Temple and Chariot, Priests and Angels, Sanctuary and Heavenly Sanctuaries in Early Jewish Mysticism*, in Hebrew (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002)].

Micha Ankori's subsequent comparison of several kabbalistic motifs with corresponding alchemical images is rich and fruitful. As I have indicated, I disagree with his position that the Hebrew Bible deleted mythic consciousness from the collective Jewish psyche, to have it "emerge only a thousand years later in the Kabbalah, in the occult Jewish literature that preceded the Kabbalah, in aggadic midrashim, and in talmudic legends." But he seems right on the mark when he correlates the narrative lexical images of the kabbalists—who "urged us to discover in the recesses of the individual soul the mysterious reality they had contemplated"—with the mainly visual images of those alchemists who understood their *opus* as being about interior transformation.

Ankori makes evocative connections between Zoharic teachings on divine and human creativity, and alchemical images of coniunctio, birth, growth, and renewal. He points to the common ground of *the erotic nature of existence* shared by Kabbalah and alchemy. He directs our attention to the symbolic association of *death motifs* in many mythic traditions, as in alchemy, with motifs of erotic union, rebirth, and renewal—describing the identity of "death as union with the source, as a return to the womb, as communion with God." He notes that "[t]his association of death with holiness, however, is alien to the biblical spirit." But he charts its emergence in the Zoharic description of the "death marriage" of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. His discussion invites further deep reflection on the psychological implications of the fundamental difference between physical, temporal death (the opposite of, or at least the end of, physical, temporal life) and symbolic death—a necessary core aspect of the archetypal motif of transformation and renewal.

Micha Ankori compares an alchemical picture of a transformative chariot to "the account of the chariot" (*Ma'aseh Merkavah*) in early Jewish mysticism. He traces the identification of the human soul with a chariot—driven by a human charioteer and pulled by two winged horses—to a discussion in Plato's *Phaedrus*. He very helpfully illuminates how both alchemical and Jewish mystical traditions place *the individual journey of the soul*—the cycles of birth and death and transformation through rebirth—at the very center of their respective concerns. Finally, Ankori explores shared alchemical and kabbalistic concerns with and focus on: the feminine, earthiness, the light of truth that "springs from the earth" (cf. the kabbalistic '*or chozer*—"returning" light, and the alchemical *lumen naturae*—"natural" light), the "one opposite the other" of dark and light, ego and shadow, and the shared recognition of the darkness as the creative source of healing and renewal—"[e]verything has to return to its source in order to regenerate."

Micha Ankori does not discuss the motifs of redemptive purpose, goal, end or aim—beyond the erotic earthly and heavenly cycles of rebirth and renewal—which Kabbalah and alchemy share and which differentiate them both from the ancient mythic traditions that he refers to at the beginning of his essay. Despite this omission, his discussion richly illuminates and amplifies some aspects of our common archetypal and western cultural psychic background. He makes an important contribution to the ongoing project of analytical psychology by bringing core motifs of our collective and cultural psyche into the foreground of consciousness for our careful consideration and reflection.

