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I

HELLENIC AND JEWISH ARTS

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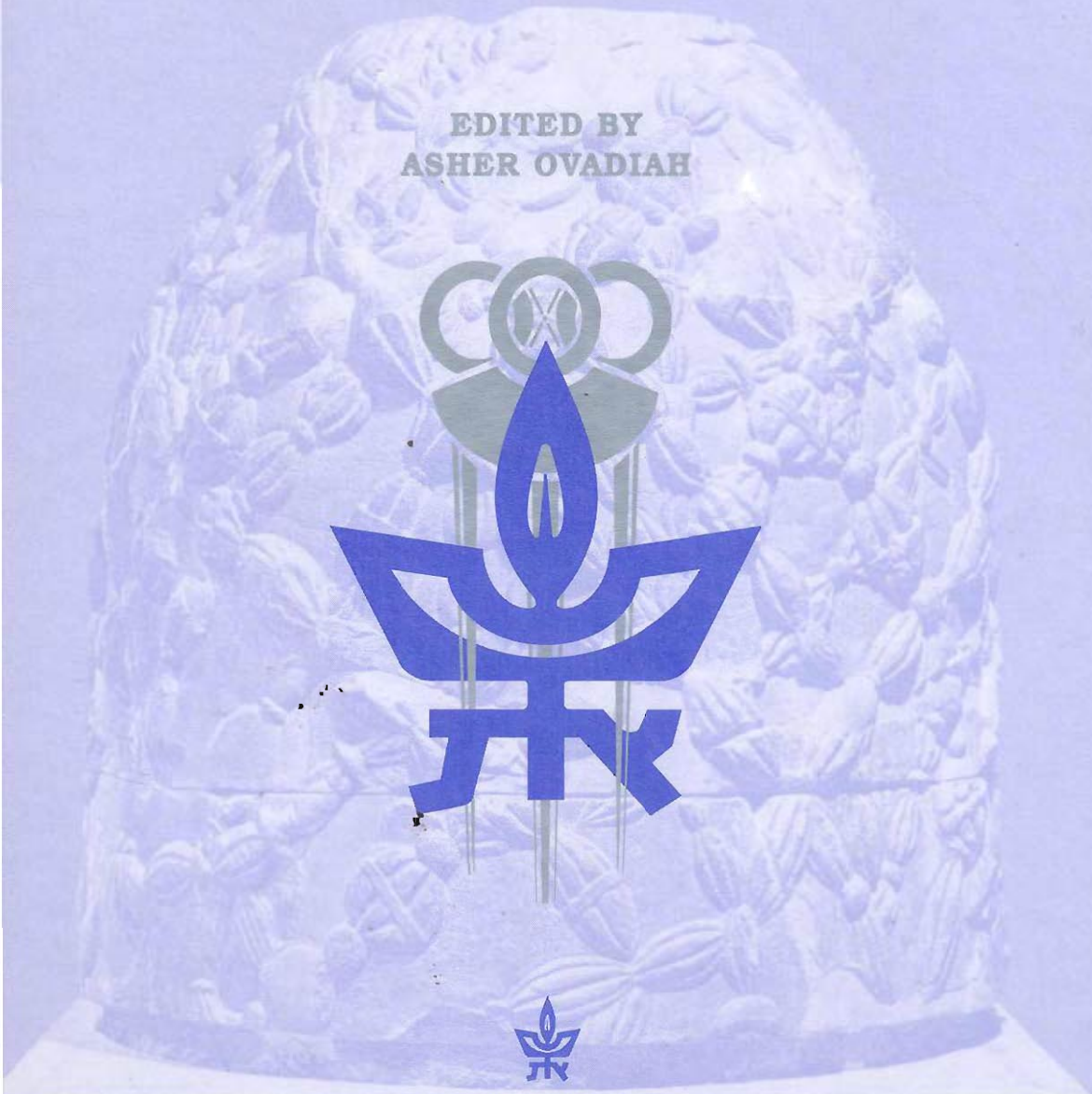

TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

In memoriam
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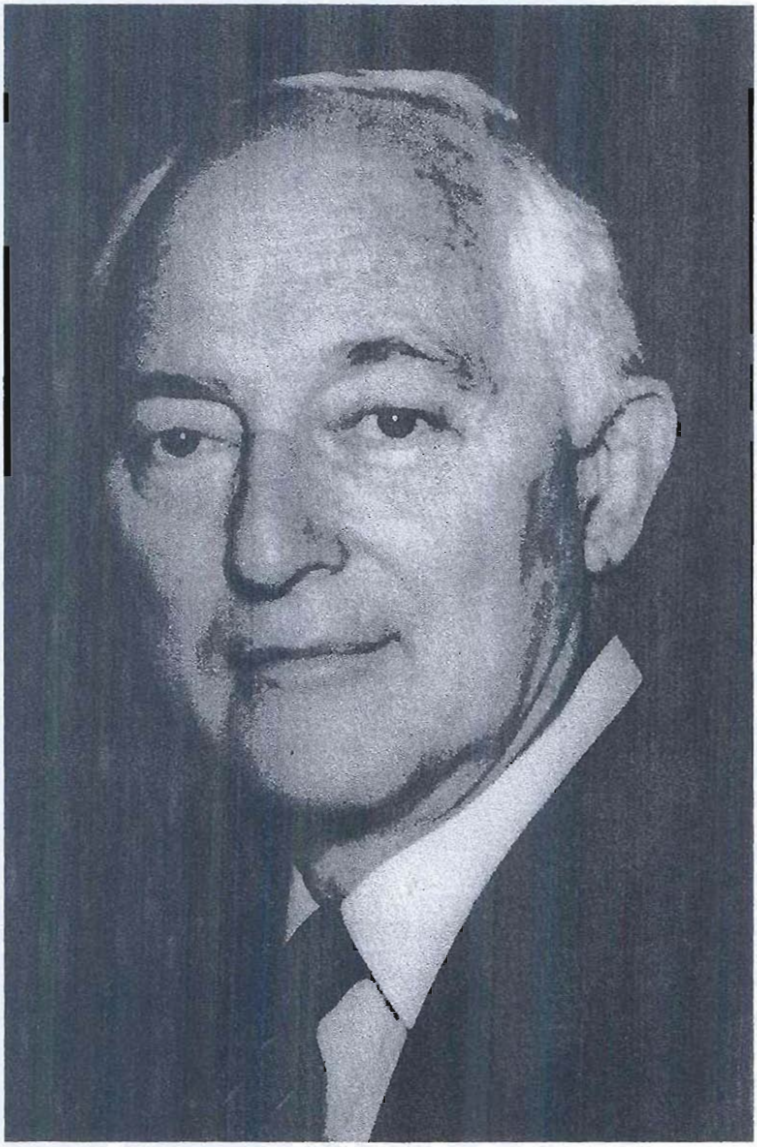

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The Reception of Greek Mythology in Modern Hebrew Culture

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> The pagan divinities served as a vehicle for ideas so profound and so tenacious that it would have been impossible for them to perish.
> Jean Senzec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, 147.

The intention of this article is to describe the process by which Greek mythology was accepted and received into modern Hebrew culture. I present a comparison between the familiarity and use of motifs from Greek mythology in the literature of the Sages and Jewish culture in late antiquity on the one hand, and motifs in Hebrew literature and modern Jewish culture from the 19th century onward on the other hand. Such comparison is relevant since familiarity with mythology can be found in both these periods, although the nature of its reception and usage differ. Although the literature of the Sages does not indicate the true extent of this familiarity, which was not fully reflected in the *midrashim*, in both the periods under discussion there has been a greater familiarity with the mythological repertoire than in other periods in Jewish history.[1]

The survival of the world of Greek gods and heroes in Western history even after the demise of the Hellenistic-Roman world has always aroused astonishment.

> Though we have broken their statues,
> Though we have driven them out of their temples,

the gods did not die because of this alldead.
(Cavafy, "Inonian Song")

And almost a hundred years before Cavafy, Heinrich Heine asked the rhetorical question: 'How long and under what conditions was the Greek world of legends (*greichische Fabelwelt*) preserved in Europe?'.[2] Time and again Heine wondered what kept the pagan gods and heroes and the stories of pagan mythology alive and even vital through the long "dark" period of Christian rule; what were the reasons behind the persistent existence of Greek (pagan) mythology in European culture; what were the different ways it was kept - or kept itself - alive; and what were the prospects of the gods surviving or being resurrected in the modern period: will the ancient gods one day die and disappear forever?

This *Fabelwelt* had never been an integral part of Jewish cultural heritage and was discovered, or rather rediscovered, by it only during the last two centuries. This rediscovery was not the result of a new reading of the Sages; on the contrary, it provided an impetus for such a new reading, in order to determine their familiarity with the mythology of the peoples around them and ascertain the nature of the authentic Talmudic *agadah* [myth]. In this article I will describe how Greek mythological motifs and the Greek world of legends were discovered by modern Jewish (Hebrew) culture and received into it. I will deal here only with patent allusions to Greek mythological motifs and not with real or imagined mythological parallels or with Jewish mythological motifs which may - or may not - have been created under the influence of Greek mythology.

At the outset of this discussion two points should be clarified: 1) '[...] Greek mythology in the sense of a homogeneous system of myths did not exist [...] This system was fabricated in the modern period by the science that arose to explain Greek myth'.[3] It was "fabricated" and "invented" by a long line of writers and adaptors who retold Greek myths and published "canonical" versions of the mythological narratives; 2) a clear distinction must be made between mythological narratives or names of mythological heroes, on the one hand, and mythic conceptual motifs or mystic ideas, on the other.[4] The Jewish world of thought may have possessed distinct elements of mythic thought (mythical conceptions) - similar to Greek mythic thought - without one finding stories from Greek mythology, or even allusions to these stories, in Jewish literature.

From a broad historical perspective, the "discovery" of the existence of mythological layers in Jewish literature is very significant for an understanding of the history of Judaism and of its *Traditionsgeschichte* (history of traditions).

It raised questions such as: Is this mythology "genuinely Jewish" or was it borrowed and then "Judaized"? What was the scope and content of this borrowing, and the nature of the Judaization, and what were the functions of these Judaized motifs within the new (Jewish) cultural system? Within this wide perspective the story of the presence and use of Greek mythology in Jewish-Hebrew culture is just one element in the complex history of the cultural interaction between Judaism and Hellenism during the Hellenistic-Roman-Byzantine period, as well as between modern Hebrew culture and the classical heritage in European culture since the beginning of the 19th century. It is part of the history of cultural borrowing by the Hebrews, first directly, and later through the European languages from the Greeks. Since Greek mythology was considered - and is still considered - an expression of paganism, that is, a cultural phenomenon totally alien to Jewish culture, the fact that Jewish culture adopted certain elements of it can be regarded as one of the more radical expressions of this process.

This borrowing process took place because Jewish culture - from biblical times onward - was part of the surrounding culture, and thus open to its cultural influences, including its mythological world. Any resistance to these influences met with two great obstacles: first, mythological motifs always tend to be transferred quite easily from one culture to another, and therefore it is not at all surprising to find "foreign" ("oriental") mythological elements in Hebrew literature. Second, mythology fills important and vital needs in human existence and world view, and has important functions in literature and art. Myths are, 'on the one hand good stories, and on the other hand bearers of important messages about life in general and life-within-society in particular'.[5] Therefore no culture can exist without myths, which it can either invent, or borrow from available sources.

The Bible reveals very few traces of Greek mythological motifs or names (the name Japheth may derive from that of the titan Yapthus, and the titans may be the counterparts of the *nefilim*, the giants in the book of Genesis, for example).[6] If, for the purpose of this discussion, we accept the view that ancient cultural contacts existed between the Jews and Greeks and that there are parallels between Hesiod, Homer and the Bible,[7] then the fact that the Bible reveals no direct use of Greek mythological motifs is all the more striking. The situation during the Second Temple (Hellenistic-Roman) period is, of course, different.

Philo of Alexandria, presumably referring to Plato's condemnation of mythology, regards mythology as opposed to "truth" and "wisdom", and as a cunning artificial invention. However, he himself uses Greek myth in order to illustrate some of his ideas and had, so writes Wolfson, no objection to the use

of mythological references for the purpose of illustrating a certain scriptural verse, even though he believed that scriptural myths differ from Greek myths since they contain an underlying meaning which can be elicited by the allegorical method.[8] Philo was well aquainted with Greek mythology, while Second Temple literature was far less familiar with it.

Sectarian works such as the Book of Enoch, the Book of Jubilees, the Sibylline Oracles and others, reveal traces of familiarity with mythology, references to it and the use of its motifs. However, here too the allusions do not reveal the true extent of this familiarity.[9]

The situation is different in the literature of the Sages, for several reasons. First, there is no doubt that in late antiquity, at least in Palestine, the Jews' familiarity with the Greek world of mythology is an historical fact, while the extent of this familiarity in the Second Temple period is a matter for speculation. There is also no question that the Sages were much more familiar with Greek literature than one might conclude from their own literature. The mythological tales and their heroes were not foreign to the Jews who, during the Hellenistic-Roman period, could have become familiar with Greek mythological narratives through various means. Even if they had never read Hesiod or Homer or Apollodorus (1st century C.E.), they could - mainly in Palestine - have become acquainted with part of the mythological repertoire. 'Greek mythologies in the sense of a homogeneous system of myths did not exist', but it was 'a shared fund of motifs and ideas ordered into a shared repertoire of stories'.[10] Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that quite a few Jews shared in part of this fund, which was itself part of a richer fund of fables, biographical legends etc., all familiar to the Sages as well to the "ordinary" Jews.

Second, in late antiquity (3rd to 6th centuries C.E.), one can find a strong presence of mythical (cosmological and cosmogonical) thinking in Jewish literature, along with different elements of "popular oral culture" shared with the surrounding culture. In light of the distinction suggested above between mythological narratives (or stories) and mythical thinking, we may argue that there was a large gap in the Sages' literature between the mythic world of thought (mythical conceptions)[11] and mythological traditions or motifs that underwent a process of mythologization and demythologization[12] on the one hand, and the explicit use of elements from Greek mythology on the other.[13]

Lieberman writes that the content of the books of Homer (*Sifrei hamiros* or *Sifrei miros*) 'was well known in certain Jewish circles in Palestine' and some Jews enjoyed the charm of Homer's style and plots. However, he affirms, 'it is very hard to prove that the Rabbis made direct use of the Odyssey or the Iliad', even in order to laugh at them.[14] A. A. Halewy, on the other hand, found a series

of parallels and allusions.[15] But what is involved is frequently an external similarity, not a quotation or explicit repetition of the mythological story.

The question one should ask is why more complete details from the mythology - other than isolated mentions of the Centaur monster and the sirens (in *Genesis Rabbah* 23,6) and a few other allusions - were not incorporated into the frame of Jewish mythic thought. Why is there this disparity between the positive attitude (and widespread use) of the Greek parable literature and the negative attitude to mythology? The Sages' contempt for idolatry cannot serve as a full explanation, as Lieberman suggests, since the mythological tales were not necessarily connected with idol worship and could, of course, be interpreted metaphorically or allegorically[16] or even receive a euhemeristic interpretation. The scant use of elements from Greek mythology is even more surprising when one considers that the Sages could have considered many mythological stories simply as folk tales (*Märchen*)[17] or could even have accepted their "historicized" (euhemeristic) interpretation. From the Sages' point of view, the world of Greek mythology could thus have been seen as a rich world of folktales belonging to the realm of the literature and popular culture of their surrounding culture. The mythological literature would have enriched the world of the Sages, not only with tales about gods and goddesses, but also with stories about the exploits of human heroes.

And there is another point to be considered. The literature of the Sages, by its very nature, expanded the scope of biblical and post-biblical literature. It dealt with a wide range of subjects and topics, and used different literary genres; its world was very wide, complex and diverse and it reflected almost a totality of cultural and social life. This is a literature of legends, fantasy, biographical tales, fables and folk-stories, and therefore would seem to be characterized by openness to the influence of the folk culture of its period. Under the inspiration of various borrowed motifs one could expand upon the plot or give new interpretation to a biblical story (or biblical myth), in the same way that the legend of Pandora elaborates on the story of Eve and the apple in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, which, in the words of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, tells about a man who gave his wife all of his worldly goods, but forbade her to open one barrel; when she disobeyed him and opened it, the scorpion inside the barrel stung her. Eve behaved in the same way in the Garden of Eden, bringing great catastrophe upon all humankind.[18] Another example is the legend of the children of God and the 'rebellion against the Heavens' (in *Genesis Rabbah* 26:7) which may have been inspired by the gigantomacies, or the image in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* VI: 'The sun is riding on a chariot and rises with a crown as a bridegroom [...]'. However, in all these instances, despite the familiarity they reveal with the myth, no interest is shown in repeating or telling the original narrative, and we

have no way of knowing whether the contemporary listeners were aware of the allusion.

The literature of the *agadot* had intertextual relations with Greek mythopeoism, and the Sages, as we have seen, introduced a few mythological motifs into their literature and harmonized them with their biblical exegeses and imaginative speculation; but the fact remains that allusions to Greek mythological motifs appeared only sporadically in the *midrashim*. Their appearance indicates that the Sages related to these motifs (as they did to parables and other genres) as part of the common literary property of the period, and it is not the mythological images but the mythological concepts that reveal the nature and content of the world-view of the Sages and their audience.

Can we explain this sporadic use of Greek mythological motifs, which were thematically and narratively undeveloped, as being due to the Rabbis' prohibitions against idolatry? According to one source the Sages regarded Greek mythological stories as no more than "idle reading":

> R. Akiba says: 'Also he who reads the extra-canonical books such as the books of Ben Sira and the books of Ben La'anah [has no share in the world to come], but he who reads the books of Homer and all other books that were written beyond that is considered like one who is reading a secular document [...]' (*Sanhedrin* X.1, 28a.).

The sages expressed different views, however, concerning the use of figurative art, and Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Alun even permitted the portrayal of human figures. But nowhere can we find permission to portray those mythological scenes or mythological figurative motifs in art which do appear in Jewish material culture, including in synagogues and cemetries, of the 4th to the 7th centuries (the examples from Beit Shearim, Beit Alpha, Beit Shean, Zipori and other places are well known).[19] The appearance of such mythological scenes and symbols in Jewish art has given rise to three interpretations:[20]

A) The first, and prevailing one, is that the Jews "neutralized" the pagan religious meaning of the mythological heroes and events. Bickerman, for example, considers each mythological symbol as capable of fulfilling diverse functions and bearing diverse messages. Thus when Jewish artists painted Orpheus or a biblical figure in the guise of Orpheus, they were not alluding to "Orpheus" but to the biblical figure. Furthermore, Orpheus could symbolize the figure of a musician or music itself, not necessarily the Orphic mysteries, and Hercules could symbolize not only a muscular hero, but also a wise man who restrains his desires and defends the oppressed. In other words, writes Bickerman, there is a difference between an *idol* and an *image*, or, as is the case

in modern Hebrew literature, the pagan heroes became heroes with a universal message.[21] So when a Jew uses a mythological story for artistic purposes, such as the story of Dionysus (or Hercules or Odysseus), this does not suggest that he has read Nonnus' 48 books of the *Dionysiaca* (mid-5th century C.E.), accepted the status of Dionysus as the preeminent pagan god in late antiquity, or taken part in the Dionysian cult. For such Jewish artists Dionysus is no more than a folk hero, the protagonist of entertaining stories, while they remain indifferent to the moral implications.

Nevertheless, even if we accept this interpretation the question still remains: why use pagan symbols and not intrinsically Jewish ones? What had Hercules to do in the tents of Shem? Why was it that Jewish artists could not find in their own literary heritage the heroes or events they needed as symbols? Why Hercules and not Samson, Dionysus and not Noah?

B) The second interpretation held that in late antiquity - in Palestine and to a greater degree in Babylonia - there was no longer any reason to be concerned about the danger that pagan art depicting gods and heroes would impart to its viewers and users the values it symbolized. Thus, Jewish society at large, including the Rabbis, developed a "liberal" or "indifferent" attitude towards the mythological repertoire. They regarded mythological scenes as marvelous and entertaining stories and saw no harm in reproducing them, distinguishing between the artistic-aesthetic form of the image and its ritual significance.[22] Like the Church Fathers, they could distinguish between pagan religion and mythology.[23] However, one may wonder if they were 'liberal' enough to regard the sciences that grew from the myth of Dionysus as mere entertainment, or even as a myth on the origins of culture, while closing their eyes to the "amoral" nature of these sciences?

C) The third, more "radical" interpretation, was that a large portion of Jewish life was conducted "outside the circle of rabbinic authority", and therefore the Jews saw no harm in using pagan symbols and disregarded the Rabbis' warnings; even perceiving their use of the mythological repertoire as a manifestation of their acculturation.

Lieberman suggests that the reason we have no definite traces of Homer's mythology in Rabbinic literature, even though some of the Jews probably read him, is because the Bible contains no material about Greek mythology, and thus the Rabbis 'found no occasion to utilize Homer'.[24] However, a mythological motif did not necessarily have to appear in the Talmudic literature only in the form of a biblical *midrash* (exegesis); it could also have appeared, for example, in the framework of a story. Therefore, it seems correct to claim that since literature has a much higher status than art in Jewish culture, it was far easier to utilize mythological motifs in art while religious and cultural prohibitions

prevented their use in literature. With the exception of a few instances, there was no effort in Rabbinic literature to harmonize Jewish tradition with Greek mythology, unlike the case in Byzantine Christian art.

In the post-Talmudic period Jewish readers were no longer aware of the meaning or origins of mythic allusions. Only a few explicit Greek mythological motifs continued to survive in the Jewish literature of the Middle Ages and only a few learned Jews were familiar with parts of Greek mythology through various and unknown legends. This was a result of the decline in pagan culture, and of the fact that the Jews were now unable to learn about Greek myths through the agency of popular oral culture: the street, the marketplace, the theatre and art, because they were unable to read Greek, and primarily because in medieval Muslim culture - as F. Franz Rosenthal has shown - very few literary books were known.[25] The appearance of mythological motifs and their use in works by Jewish authors in the Middle Ages can only testify to familarity through some means, but cannot show that the contemporary reader could, as the modern interpreter can, have identified the source and the manner in which it was used.[26]

Thus, the appearance of certain Greek mythological motifs was not a result of the rediscovery of the mythological layers in the Talmud but a clear result of the Jewish response to European culture.

The learned Jews in the Italian Renaissance and after, who perceived the Jewish heritage as a distinguished part of the classical tradition, did not read Greek and relied on translations into Latin or Italian.[27] Thus, they were able to absorb mythological motifs, mainly through the *Manuals* of the 16th and 17th centuries, 'which had their place in the library of every man of letters',[28] and through literature and art (just as the Sages had acquired a second-hand familiarity with Greek mythological motifs). From the time of the Renaissance, European literature and art became rich in allusions to Greek mythology.[29] Under the influence of their Christian cultural environment they also understood myth as allegories and metaphors, even as "history".

I will mention only two examples: Abraham ben Samuel Mordecai Zacuto (1452-1515), the author of *Sefer Yuchasin (Book of Genealogies)*, was familiar with Greek mythology and in the parts of his book dealing with the time of the Patriarchs and the First and Second Temple periods, he interposed names from Greek mythology and history for the purpose of chronological synchronization. Another example is David de Bene (d. 1635), a Jewish-Italian rabbinical author and preacher in Mantua, who, 'earlier in life, had shown an excessive tendency to use in his sermons mythological motifs' and caused bitter dispute.[30]

However, there is a great difference between the appearance of a few mythological motifs in writings of limited circulation and their appearance

within the broad cultural discourse. Thus, only in the modern period did "enlightened" Jews rediscover, or rather discover, Greek literature and mythology. This was mainly a result of the fact that during the 18th and the 19th centuries the classical heritage, including the pagan gods, became an integral part of European culture. Jewish readers learned about pagan deities and became aquainted with mythological stories through European literature, drama and art, as well as through popular culture. They could also read translations of classical literature into different European languages and adaptations of mythological stories which became very popular in Western literature - for adults as well as for children (and met with moralistic resistance).[31]

A Hebrew reader in the second half of the 19th century and after could also become familiar with Greek mythology through popular history books such as *Divrei yemi olam* by Kalman Schulman (Vilna, 1867) and later on other popular history books, which included information about the religions and mythologies of the ancient world. However, it is interesting to note that only from the beginning of the 20th century could the Hebrew reader read in Hebrew popular adaptations of Greek mythology, which first appeared in Warsaw (1909, 1921) and then in Palestine (1916). The first, *Greek Legends - A Selection of Greek Mythological Stories*, was adapted by I.D. Rosenstein, and the second, *Greek Legends*, was adapted by A. Mitlopolitanski (based on a Polish text). The text was deliberately translated in a biblical style in order to create a parallel between the Greek mythology and the biblical story of Creation. Earlier, in 1901, *Hasagah bezahav (The Golden Quest: A Legend based on Mythology)* was published in Bredichev, an adaptation by M. Zablotzki of the story of the *Golden Fleece*. In 1916 Yehuda Gur-Grazowsky published a book entitled *From the Legends of the Greeks*, based on the *Argonauts* (1899) by the Polish writer Eliza Orzezkowa. Another adaptation (from the German) by Mordechai Ha-Ezrachi, was published in Tel-Aviv in 1923/4, while Asher Baras adapted the Odyssey legends for the Mitzpe Publishing House (an illustrated children's library, 1927/8). The most popular books in Hebrew were probably Moshe Ben-Eliezer's translation of Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes, or Greek Legends* (1856) which appeared in 1934 and was printed in several editions, and Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, published in 1967.

In 1888 Aaron Kaminka (1866-1950), a rabbi, scholar and translator, published a collection of translations entitled *Zemurot nokhri'ot (Alien Sprigs)*. Tchernichowsky began to publish his translations in the early 1920s and made the most valuable contribution to the translation of classical literary works into Hebrew in the first half of the 20th century.

As a result, the basic repertoire of Greek mythology became quite familiar to a growing body of educated readers among the Jewish public. As was the case in late antiquity, Jews did not need to read Homer in order to know something about the Homeric heroes, but it is clear that many of them became acquainted with a large body of classical literature through translations and adaptations. The knowledge of Greek mythology became part of the cultural world of the modern Hebrew reader even though it was not an integral part of his education and cultural world as it was for the educated European public.

What is no less important is that this time an ideological justification was required for this familiarity, and even more - for the new process of reception. This is mainly because the reception and use of mythological motifs by and in Hebrew culture was seen as a radical manifestation of acculturation.

In Byron's epic *Don Juan*, Don Juan's tutors have some hesitation in teaching classical works:

> ...] for their Aeneids, Illiads, and Odyssey,
> [they] were forced to make an odd sort of apology,
> For Donna Inez (his mother) dreaded the mythology (I. 326-328).

Donna Inez has many Jewish counterparts. The discovery of classical heritage by Jewish men of letters was also the discovery of mythology and, as a result, there were those, already at the dawn of the Jewish Enlightenment, who recognized the danger; and since they identified classical literature with mythology and idolatry, they did their best to combat it and to prevent the introduction of Greek mythology to the Hebrew reader and its penetration into Hebrew literature.

In the introduction to the first issue of *Ha-me'assef*, the organ of the Berlin *Haskalah* [the Jewish enlightenment] in 1783, Naphtali Herz Wessely warned the writers of modern Hebrew poetry against being carried away by the prevailing fashion in contemporary European poetry: '[...] in translating the poems and songs do not mention the names of the ancient gods that the Greeks and Romans referred to in their poems and ethics, and to which all the European poets of our times are drawn, for Jacob supped not of things like these. They should not be heard from your mouths'.

The writers of *Ha-me'assef* did not accept Wessely's warning; they wrote songs of nature, drinking songs, as well as "songs of debauchery", and even interspersed mythological motifs in their writing.

From the outset the *Haskalah* had revealed a trend of introducing - at an unhurried pace - the "literature of Japheth" into the tents of Shem. As a result, here and there mythological motifs and names of deities were interspersed into

Hebrew literature or excerpts of classical works were translated. I will mention only a few examples:

David Zamosc (1789-1864) dared to mention Mars, the god of war, in the same breath as King David, in the collection *Resise hamelitzah* (1821); J. L. Gordon (1830-1892) translated a poem by Anacreon; and the poet Micha Joseph Lebensohn (1828-1856) at the age of 19 translated, from Schiller's German version, 97 lines of the *Aeneid*, book ii (a translation that established his reputation in Vilna's literary world). In 1868, Israel Rall (1838-1893) published in Odessa the first collection in Hebrew called *Shirei Romi (Roman Poetry)* in which he drew a distinction between Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. In the *Metamorphoses* he discerned a deep-seated link to the cosmogony of the Holy Scriptures, for in both books the act of creation is described as the work of a constitutive god.

Modern Hebrew literature, however, did not easily accept mythological motifs into its midst. A deeply internalized traditional cultural barrier inhibited, delayed and obstructed the transfer of Greek and Roman literature into the Hebrew language. Classical literature was perceived as literature which, in its entirety and by its very nature, was charged with dangerous pagan values. This called for endless apologetics on the part of translators and editors.

I. B. Levinsohn, the central figure in the *Haskalah* movement in Eastern Europe in the mid-19th century, was the first to give the most articulated and sophisticated legitimization not only to the knowledge of Greek mythology but also to its use. He himself even chose to begin his book *Te'udah beYisrael* (1823) with a quotation from Virgil, and also to preface the first section with a short poem he wrote, called "To Wisdom" *(Pallas Athene)*, in which he called upon the goddess to disseminate wisdom among the Jews.[32]

Levinsohn saw nothing wrong in using the Greek metaphors merely because they were anchored in Greek mythology. In his (and not only his) opinion, the "Greek wisdom" forbidden by the Sages was Greek mythology, but he believed there was no longer any connection between the signified and the signifier. If that were not the case, he writes with barbed irony, Jews could not mention, for instance, the names of the continents "Europe" and "Asia" - 'for these are the names of gods' - or the names of certain towns and cities, the months of the year and the days of the week.

Levinsohn believes Jews may use mythological symbols because there is no longer any significance or substance to the names and they no longer attest to 'any authority or divinity'. The Hebrew writer is permitted not only to acknowledge the mythological heroes as non-divine, but also to make use of mythological metaphors and allegory without any fear of apostasy. Based on this view, mythology is but a repertoire of symbols representing various

concrete things. For him, as for other Jewish writers in the course of the 19th century and after, mythology became not a *philosophia moralis* or fables with hidden meaning, but simply part of the repertoire of symbols and names which were the common property of culture. Its use was a manifestation of cultural change and openness to Western culture and its heritage.

In modern Hebrew literature mythological motifs have become a set of archetypes and a sub-text. For the first time, Jewish authors are not only alluding to Greek mythology but using it explicitly. The mythological heritage of Greece has become part of the culture of educated Jews who see nothing wrong with adopting motifs from classical literature, even mythological motifs, into Hebrew culture. This is an expression of the new scope of their (European) cultural orbit. But what was an act of challenging traditional conservatism and conservative orthodoxy, from a radical enlightenment point of view, has become an expression of revolt in radical Hebraism.

In her article "Hellenism Revisited: The Use of Greek Myth in Modern Hebrew Literature",[33] Glenda Abramson correctly writes that 'The use of Greek myth by twentieth-century Hebrew poets does not constitute a trend but features sporadically in works from the Yishuv period to modern Israel'. However, this use of mythological motifs in the broad cultural discourse is an expression of several trends and needs of modern Hebrew culture at large. It is an expression, often a radical expression, of a revolt or protest against traditional Judaism and traditional values (Greek gods and Greek heroes, for example, were regarded as representing "beauty", "spontaneity", "natural feeling toward nature", "courage" etc., compared to the Jewish symbolic system which presumably lacks means of expressing these qualities). In using mythological symbols the modern Hebrew writers are expressing the new openness of Hebrew literature, and more than that - the belief that there is a common world of symbols which represent a general human truth and a common denominator of humanity and of the human condition, which is shared by both Jews and non-Jews. The use of mythological motifs symbolizes the wish not to be dependent on Jewish literary tradition only, but to be part of the "general" European culture.

The use of Greek mythological motifs also reveals the belief that Greek mythology is a rich domain in which one can find universal human symbols that are missing in Jewish heritage ('Greek mythology', wrote Goethe, 'is an exhaustless treasury of divine and human symbols').

From this point of view, Jewish traditional literature has been seen as lacking symbols which could express the modern human condition.

Thus, in contrast to Philo, modern Jews, following the European understanding of Greek mythology, accept the view that Greek mythologies are not merely invented pretty stories, which only serve the purpose of illustrating

certain scriptural myths, and have also adopted the view that they contain an inner universal truth. Thus, the lack of a mythological repertoire that could carry this universal truth is considered a lacuna in modern Jewish culture. The modern Jew finds in the mythological world of symbols primary allegories representing the inner life, the existential stand and the nature of modern man: a skeptic, a wanderer, a man struggling against his fate and destiny, an eternal pilgrim in time and place, a tragic hero etc. Prometheus, to take just one example, became a symbol for the young pioneer in Palestine who willingly bound himself to the rock (in this case, the rocks of the Galilee). 'To me', wrote a young pioneer in the early 20th century, 'all of our people are like Prometheus, chained to the rock cliff, where an eagle devoured his liver. And where is the redeeming Hercules who will cut our bonds and release us from our suffering?'.[34]

From approximately the 1930s onwards there was also no longer any need for legitimation. The use of motifs from Greek mythology was taken for granted since they were regarded as part of Western culture - actually as universal motifs - so that no importance was attached to the religious-cultural context in which they had first appeared. The quotations and the use became direct, without any need of disguise or apologetics. Greek mythology can be found in almost every part of the cultural discourse: the modern educated Jew's repertoire of symbols includes stories and heroes such as Pandora, Tantalus, Sisyphus, Penelope, Orpheus, Ariadne, the Trojan heroes, the Argonauts and others.[35] These, and others, do not present pagan-mythical conceptions on the nature of the creation, but are stories representing different kinds of social and political situations.

While the Jew in the Talmudic era had limited access to the surrounding culture, the modern Jew has no such restraints, and he is a consumer of mythological symbols not only from mosaics or mime performances, but from a broad range of cultural elements. Greek mythology exists in its own right and the knowledge or lack of knowledge of it is a function of education or ignorance, not of any cultural limitations.[36]

Paradoxically, the fact that mythology is almost "everywhere" around us makes its existence self-evident and "normal", divesting it of its previous revolutionary (and provocative) nature, as well as its claim to present a non-traditional world-view. However, the main question that remains is whether the educated Israeli reader is sufficiently well-versed in mythology to understand the mythological allusions or concepts without an interpretative intermediary. The appearance of mythology in Hebrew literature, immeasurably more limited in scope than in European literature, does not seem to suggest that the world of mythology is an integral part of the cultural world of the Hebrew reader. The

radical development in modern Hebrew culture was probably not the use of the mythological repertoire of symbols, but the new reading of the Jewish traditional sources. While the rabbinic *midrash* drew its hermeneutic methods from the Homeric commentary (Alexander 1990), modern Jewish culture began to use biblical (and midrashic) stories as a font of allegories and metaphors for the condition of modern man, and to look for mythical layers in Jewish intellectual tradition. The main question concerning the new Jewish culture is therefore, not the frequent and open use of Greek mythological motifs in literature or in the public discourse, but rather how this openness to mythology reflects the nature of the modern Jewish world-view.

Notes

1. By "familiarity" I refer to knowledge based on contact, which does not necessarily signify cultural openness, for even between foreign and hostile cultures familiarity may exist; there are also diverse types and levels of familiarity: e.g. familiarity based on fortuitous, random and partial reception differs from that based on systematic study and broad knowledge; there is also a difference between the reception of mythological motifs from an oral culture and that based on the translation of books that contain mythological stories. By "usage" I refer to mythological motifs internalized in one way or another into the receiving culture and which may serve different functions than those they filled in the original culture. No less important is the fundamental difference between use of a mythological motif as an allusion and its direct and overt use; between its use as an image and its use as an archetype; between an implicit reference to motifs and names and the repetition of an entire mythological narrative. By "motif" I refer to the name or the core of a story, while a "narrative" refers to a complete story.
2. Heine 1964: 45; but Heine also lamented the disappearance of the "gods of Greece", who are now 'abandoned Gods, dead shades, wandering at night as insubstantial as mists which the wind disperses' (Heine 1986: 78-82).
3. Edmunds 1990: 2; on the formation of Greek mythology, see Dowden 1992:13-17. On the "science of mythology" since the end of the 17th century, see Feldman and Richardson 1972.
4. Mondi 1990: 150.
5. Kirk 1975: 29.
6. However, the *nefilim* exist "outside" of the Creation, since they are not the sons of the first man.
7. Theories about the affinity between Greek mythology and biblical literature have been current for many years, and are not relevant here. On the *nefilim*

and the *bnei Elohim*, see van Seters 1988: 5-9. There is a similarity, for example, between the story of Jephtha's daughter and the story about the king of Crete, Idomeneus. Here one can argue that this is a motif common to cultures of the ancient East.

8. Wolfson 1948: 32-34.
9. In Ben-Sira (14:17-19) there is a nearly direct quotation from the *Iliad* VI, 146-150.
10. Dowden 1992: 8.
11. Urbach 1986: 161-189
12. Yassif 1994: 129.
13. Urbach 1986: 188-189, 201-205; Mack 1989: 71-74.
14. Lieberman 1994: 100-114; Lieberman 1994a: 115-127.
15. Halewy 1963: 229-250; *id.* 1972: 18-36.
16. Stroumsa 1987: 309-321; on the growth, development and influence of the Neoplatonist allegorical reading of the Iliad and Odyssey, see Lamberton 1989. One can argue that the biblical stories about Tubal-Cain and Jubal and the later Jewish legends on the origin of culture derive from Greek-Hellenistic sources or are at least parallel to them.
17. 'A myth aims at being a false tale, resembling a true one...A myth is but a picture and image of a tale'. Plutarch, "On the Fame of the Athenians", in *Moralia*,1993:348.
18. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, A. Schecter edition, 56:1, 6; *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*. Another allusion is found in *Nedarim* 9, which quotes a story by Shimon HaTzadik about a 'monk from the south', which is reminiscent of the legend about Narcissus, but in the Talmud the handsome monk does not succumb to the temptation.
19. Ovadiah 1993: 76-82; Nezer and Weiss 1992: 75-80; *id.* 1992a: 36-43.
20. There is a vast literature on this subject but a long list of references is not necessary here.
21. Bickerman 1986: 235 .
22. Tsafrir 1984: 214-219.
23. Weitzmann 1951.
24. Lieberman 1994a: 126-127.
25. Rosenthal 1975: 256-266.
26. Idel 1990-91: 119-127; Idel 1992: 7-16.
27. Although Greek mythology took on diverse forms in European and Christian culture, its revival in the Renaissance is not a simple continuation of remnants of traditions and the revitalization of these vestiges, but rather a rediscovery and a different use of mythology.
28. Seznec 1972: 279.
29. Turner 1981: 77-134.
30. Kaufman 1896: 513-524.
31. Brüggeman 1987: 93-116; Doderer 1977: 526-529.

32. Heine, ironically, wondered why Pallas Athene, with her shield and wisdom, was unable to prevent the destruction of the gods ("Die Götter Griechnlandes").
33. Abramson 1990: 237-256; Ben-Porat 1979: 34-43.
34. Zur 1922/1988: 138.
35. As I was preparing this article for publication, I read in a newspaper a political parable which tells the story of Theseus and the minotaur; its moral was that in Israel there are heroes capable of overpowering monsters, but they lack Ariadne's thread to lead them out of the labyrinth. Yaron London, *Yedioth Aharonoth*, July 25, 1995. However, the writer did not feel he could rely on his readers' knowledge; instead of merely alluding to the image, he found it necessary to briefly relate the story.
36. In 1922, the congregation of a Tel-Aviv synagogue complained about the decoration of a house in that city with statues in the Greek style. They suggested that houses should be embellished with decorations of a "Jewish" nature, such as vines, flowers, and the like. However, the attempt to censor figurative sculpture failed. On the other hand, in 1995, the idea of placing a copy of Michaelangelo's *David* in Jerusalem was rejected on the grounds that it is a "pagan sculpture".

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