**E.J. Michael Witzel, The Origins of The World’s Mythologies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)**

Anyone interested in the philosophy of religion and its close but neglected cousin the philosophy of mythology will want to take note of the extraordinary hypothesis defended in this new book: that we are now in a position to scientifically trace the origins of world mythology back to its original form in Africa some 60,000 years ago, and perhaps even further to the very earliest myths and rituals of our species (and even of another species, the Neanderthal). The author, Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, claims the possibility of our beginning to “understand the human condition as experienced by our most distant ancestors” (373) by uncovering “the original mythology of earliest humankind in Africa, well before c. 65,000 BCE” and thus “obtain[ing] a glimpse of the belief system of early Homo sapiens sapiens” (372). Not only this, but by doing so we could radically reshape our understanding of our present day beliefs and practices, for they are unconsciously based, so Witzel claims, on ancient myths that date back to the Paleolithic era, which “can be shown to govern much of our current thinking about the universe and the world, as well as the role that humans and our society play in them” (377).

The central thesis of the book is that the mythology of the world can be traced back to two ancient original myths. The older of these myths Witzel calls the “Gondwana” myth, which he traces back to an African origin some 65,000 years ago; it remains the dominant mythological system throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa, but also spread out of Africa into Australia and Melanesia. However, at some point (Witzel dates it to 40,000 years ago), a new and very different mythical system which Witzel calls the “Laurasian” myth split off from the Gondwana myth—perhaps, he speculates, in Southwest Asia -- and spread throughout Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Today the Laurasian myth, he claims, has come to dominate the world, and forms the basis for the great mythical systems of current religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Thus the modern world has inherited the “great divide between the two mythological regions, Laurasia and Gondwana” (291).

Those familiar with the history of the study of mythology will of course know that it is full of wildly ambitious but discredited claims to have discovered the ur-myth of humanity, including Max Muller’s solar myth, James Frazer’s “golden bough,” and in the 20th century, Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth” of the hero. Indeed, the very idea of seeking an ur-myth has fallen out of fashion, given the history of failure, a fact Witzel is quite conscious of (he calls Frazer a “monomaniac”). Thus a claim to have discovered a new, hitherto unrecognized pattern in the world’s extant mythology – and indeed to trace it back to the very origin of the human species -- will rightly be treated with no small amount of skepticism, if not incredulity.

Witzel however claims to have two new weapons in his arsenal that allow him to succeed where so many others have failed. The first is the support of the sciences of archeology, linguistics, and genetics as a basis for reconstructing the movement of early man out of Africa to populate the world. Witzel for instance draws on evidence that Australia and Melanesia were populated very early in a first wave of African migration that was completed by 50,000 years ago, and that the Americas were populated in a later movement some 20,000 years ago. He uses these dates to support his claim that the “last possible stage of coherent Gondwana mythology” must have a “good date *ad quem*” of around 50,000 years ago, corresponding to the “archeologically attested immigration of the Australians and the Melanesians” at that date (413). The later Laurasian myth (which is found in the Americas), must have developed “between 65,000 and 20,000 years ago” (413), and most likely around 40,000 years ago, he thinks.

In truth, the long 90-page chapter on “The Contribution of Other Sciences” adds little evidentiary support for Witzel’s thesis, and given its complex, technical nature, most readers will do well to simply skip it. The details of the Out of Africa theory remain highly speculative and controversial, and the dating is subject to enormous range of error. Thus the very best it can do for Witzel’s thesis, even on the most generous reading, is give an enormous range of possibility, “between 65,00 and 20,000 years ago,” for the Laurasian myth. But even that would be an overstatement, since it provides no independent evidence that there even is a Laurasian versus a Gondwana myth, or that even if the world is divided into two such mythologies, that this division can be traced to ancestral patterns of population movement, rather than say to diffusion, or even independent origin. Witzel is obviously concerned to give scientific legitimacy to his project in order to distinguish himself from the armchair speculation of a Frazer, but this concern leads him to overstate the relevance of “scientific” evidence from areas outside of myth.

Far more significant is Witzel’s claim to a bold methodological innovation in the study of myth. Witzel acknowledges the enormous barriers to his theory, requiring that one reconstruct an original myth from tens of thousands of years ago by examining the surviving disparate myths of many different peoples over vast geographical areas. But he thinks his innovative method can overcome these barriers. Rather than compare “occurrences of individual myths,” as do other scholars, Witzel claims that his approach is “situated at a higher level”: “I compare *sets* of myths” (358). That is, he looks at “whole mythologies and their structures, not single myths or motifs, as is commonly done” (359). This is, Witzel says, “a new comparative approach,” that takes “account of the complete aggregate extent and internal structure of the various mythologies—especially of their story line” (50). This new method allows us, Witzel thinks, to talk about a genuine “science” of myth.

This method allows Witzel to postulate the “great divide” between two distinct mythical traditions: the older Gondwana myth and the newer Laurasian myth. This judgment is based on certain key structural differences that Witzel claims to see in Afro-Australian versus Laurasian mythology. For one thing, the Afro-Australian myths are, he thinks, less focused on cosmology and more on the place of humans in the world; correspondingly, they lack “’true’ creation stories (emergence out of nothing/chaos)” (321); their “interest” “clearly lies with the origins of humans” (338). But is the notion of a “story line” that turns out to be the most important idea in Witzel’s reconstruction, for his central claim is that the key distinguishing feature between Gondwanan and Laurasian myth is that the latter radically departs from the former by the radical innovation of structuring its myths around a single, coherent storyline. This is the source of what Witzel calls the “first novel” in the history of the world; the Laurasian myth “combines certain previous (Gondwana) mythological fragments into one continuous story, a “novel” that relates everything from the beginning of the world to the end” (415). In contrast, he claims, Gondwana myth lacks a true beginning (creation from nothing), a true ending (a Ragnarok), and a continuous story line in between.

In order to assess these remarkable claims, we may look at Witzel’s basic summary of the two kinds of myths:

Gondwana basic myth (Table 5.2, p. 323):

-- In the beginning heaven and earth (and the sea) already exist

-- a High God lives in heaven, or on earth, or ascends to heaven later

-- series of lower gods, often children of High God, act as tricksters and culture heroes

-- primordial period ended by some evil deed of son of High God (or by humans)

-- humans are created from trees and clay (or rock); occasionally descend directly from the gods

--humans act haughtily or make a mistake; punishment by a great flood; humans reemerge

-- (an end to the world is missing)

Laurasian basic myth (Table 5.3 p. 323):

-- Creation from nothing, chaos, etc.

-- Father Heaven/Mother Earth created, separated

-- Father Heaven engenders:

Two generations (Titans/Olympians)

Four (five) generations/ages

-- Heaven pushed up son released

--Current gods defeat/kill predecessors

--Killing the dragon/sacred drink

--Humans: somatic descendants of Sun god

-- They (or a god) show hubris; are punished by a flood

-- Trickster deities bring culture; humans spread, emergence of nobles, local culture begins

-- Final destruction of world; new heaven and earth emerge.

The first thing we may notice is how similar these two myths are; both involve creation at least of humans, a High God in heaven, lower gods; tricksters associated with the origins of culture; human hubris or evil deed and punishment (the correspondence would be even closer had Witzel not chosen to omit the flood myth and the end of the world myth both of which he acknowledges is present in Afro-Australian myth as well). And Witzel himself notes that there is a surprising parallel between the Gondwana myth and the Laurasian-derived Biblical creation story (with only the latter, in Witzel’s view, counts as having a coherent storyline), though he does not seem to think this constitutes a threat to his theory (339). In any case, it is hard to accept Witzel’s claim that there is a definitive, objective distinction in *structure* between the two, such that the Laurasian myth can be described as continuous, coherent, and novelistic; while the Gondwana myth is a mere collection of isolated incidents. The Laurasian myth can equally be seen as a mere collection without anything close to a “novelistic” self-explanatory storyline. Why do the current gods kill the previous ones? Where does the dragon come from? Why does he have to be killed? Why are there multiple generations? Nor is the Gondana myth obviously less structured or coherent. Even Witzel admits that some Gondwana myths do seem to have a “stepwise creation”, i.e. a storyline, but again he refuses to see this as counterevidence to his theory (362).

The situation is even worse when one realizes that these summaries are not objective data from the field. There is no single myth anywhere that contains all these elements; it is a composite reconstruction by Witzel from myths of different peoples found over enormous geographic areas. And to complicate matters even more, as Witzel recognizes, cosmogonic myths are often held as closely guarded secrets, revealed only to initiates. The arbitrariness of this process is exemplified by the fact that other scholars who attempt to reconstruct a universal myth, such as van Binsbergen, end up with a very different storyline and do not see the purported division between Laurasian and Gondwana myth (358). It seems yet more implausible that we can use this reconstruction made from surviving myths to extrapolate back to the original myths of at least 40,000 years ago, and moreover to do so with sufficient accuracy to detect a clear distinction between a novelistic and an episodic set of myths. In fact, as Witzel himself recognizes, a scholarly reconstruction may easily *impose* a structure on a set of myths, and an external observer might “order” the motifs of Gondwana myth so that “an incipient story line…would emerge” (322). And why should we assume that there was even a single basic myth in any given society, as opposed to a variety of different and often contradictory myths? Witzel may well be projecting a modern preference for unity and order back onto ancient times.

It would thus seem that we have little to reason to be confident that the reconstructed Laurasian and Gondwana myths are anything more than an artifact of Witzel’s method. For example, Witzel admits that African myths do sometimes include an end of the world. He does not count it as part of the genuine Gondwana myth because, in his judgment, it is too “rare” to be original (181). But can we confidently judge that the relative rarity of this mytheme in surviving African myth is clear evidence of its not existing in the original myth some 60,000 years ago? Indeed, even in “Laurasian” myth the idea of an end of the world could be called “rare”; it plays essentially no role in Greek myth, and is only prevalent in the Islamic-Christian tradition because of the influence of Zoroastrian thought. This is not a minor issue, as the existence of a proper beginning and end seems to be the key fact that makes Witzel see the Laurasian myth as a “novel” and the Gondwana myth as unstructured.

Witzel’s method of focusing on larger mythical structures thus seems hardly likely to ensure objective results, and indeed it may result in imposing that structure from outside. Nor does it even seem accurate to characterize this method as “new.” While many scholars of myth examine individual mythemes, equally many have focused on larger units and storylines; indeed, that is precisely what James Frazer did: reconstruct a complex, coherent story line in the golden bough myth (even if it is not a cosmogonic myth with a beginning and end of the world). But the Frazer myth is however now taken to be the epitome of arbitrary scholarly reconstruction.

Even more problematic is the claim that any such ancient mythical patterns could explain the way people view the world today. Witzel’s theory, even it proved true, would face a central objection to all historical-diffusionist theories of myth: that it cannot explain how the myth came to be in the first place, nor why it persists. Such theories inevitably adopt an implausibly historical determinist picture of human nature; Witzel’s own version of this is his particular hobby-horse, the idea of “path-dependence,” a term he repeats throughout the book. He defines this idea as “the influence of early, foundational cultural features on successor cultures” (376), and claims that “the Laurasian pattern that was set in late Paleolithic times can be shown to govern much of our current thinking” (377). Even apart from the vagueness of this formulation, the explanation will not do. For if the notion of “path-dependence” is invoked to explain the persistence of basic ideas over long periods of time, it is unable to explain how these ideas can change – a fact particularly significant for a theory that posits a radical divergence between primitive Gondwana myth and later Laurasian myth. Hence the theory must presupposes a form of radical “path-independence” to go along with the path indendence. But then the idea of path-dependence ends up having no explanatory or predictive value: sometimes things change, sometimes things stay the same.

For all its flaws, however, *The Origins of the World’s Mythologies* is an important work. The existence of remarkable parallels among myths found worldwide remains a major unsolved problem. Even if Witzel’s conclusions are not convincing, his book will no doubt be influential in helping make respectable once again the scholarly quest for a universal or at least common shared myths across cultures. If it does that alone, it will make a major contribution to the study of myth.