

Playing with Leviathan: On Myth in the Book of Job

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The Book of Job is among the most mysterious and controversial books in the Biblical canon. It asks two daunting questions whose answers are assumed in most of the Hebrew Bible: Does God treat human beings justly? Are human beings the most important part of creation? However, the book neither asks nor answers these questions directly. Instead, they are hidden in a narrative brought to life in a series of dramatic but often cryptic speeches. In these speeches as well as in the narrative's very structure, myth is central: archetypal characters and stories of the human imagination play a role distinct from but related to theological and ethical thinking. How does the Book of Job's portrayal and use of myth serve to ask and answer the theological questions that the book poses? How do the mythic elements affect the education and evolution of Job over the course of the book? Finally, what does the Book of Job teach the reader about the nature and function of myth?

Part I: Myth behind Belief

The most striking instance of myth in the Book of Job occurs in God's final words from the whirlwind, in which He describes Leviathan, the great sea-beast. In order to understand the significance of God's portrait of Leviathan, it is necessary first to examine how the sea-beast is used earlier in the book. Job and Bildad, one of his accusers, reference this mythological being to express a desire or support an opinion; in the process, they reveal some of their theological presuppositions. Job invokes Leviathan at the beginning of his first speech: amidst a series of exhortations to "annul the day that [he] was born," Job declares, "Let the day-cursers hex it,/those ready to rouse Leviathan" (Job 3:3; 3:8). Annulling Job's birthday is a dark, destructive

act that counteracts his own creation. Along with the “day-cursers,” the abstract agents Job asks to destroy his birthday include “darkness,” “death’s shadow,” “cloud-mass,” “day-gloom,” “night,” and “murk” (Job 3:5-6). The day-cursers are surely dark as well, and their association with Leviathan suggests that he is too. Since God is a creator, and Leviathan is cast as a destroyer, Job clearly understands the two as opposites.

This use of the mythological to express a binary understanding becomes clearer in Job’s next reference to the archetypal sea monster, alternately called Leviathan, Yamm, Sea Beast, and Rahab. When Job bemoans his state and the brevity of a human’s life, he again evokes this creature: “Am I Yamm or am I the Sea Beast,” he asks God, “that You should put a watch on me?” (Job 7:12). Job imagines the sea monster as God’s opponent, on whom He would put a watch. To understand his own suffering, Job equates himself with this monstrous opponent. Thus, Job reveals that he has relied on a simple, binary account of God’s relationship to others. He has understood God as either for or against: for righteous men, against monsters; for the good, against the wicked. When Bildad later says, “Through His power [God] subdued Yamm,” he reveals this same binary thinking (Job 26:12).

For God to be humanly just in relation to human beings (as Job had believed before his affliction), He must be *for* them. This deep-seated view that God’s relationships with others can be simply understood underlies the view that God is just in a manner understandable to human beings. This explication of Job’s worldview helps explain why, in his speeches throughout the book, Job continually attempts to square God’s justice with his unwarranted suffering. If Bildad’s view can be taken as representative of Job’s accusers generally, it is clear that their beliefs are similarly founded. The cosmological view of a just world ruled by a just God is

ingrained in Job and his accusers more deeply than conscious thought and reason: it is a part of the mythical, archetypal imagination that underlies their worldviews.

Thus, the theological thinking of Job and his accusers is grounded less in codified Biblical doctrine than in myths, which is unsurprising, given that none of the characters in the Book of Job are Israelites, and their level of familiarity with the Hebrew Bible is unclear. Regardless, the characters' reliance on myth explains why Job's accusers, though they purport to believe a doctrine explicitly endorsed by Biblical passages, particularly in Deuteronomy and the Psalms (to be discussed later), never confront Job's claims with Biblical arguments. They are bound to these myths and the assumption underlying them, that God's ways are intelligible to man. Job and his accusers do not truly know what they say when they admit God's greatness and deny their own wisdom, for their mythologizing shows that they fundamentally misunderstand what it means for God to be beyond their understanding.

Part II: Subverting Leviathan

It is not only Job and Bildad whose theological presuppositions are grounded in and expressed by myth; rather, myth is put to this same use in many other Biblical books, with specific reference to Leviathan. By one account, Leviathan is singled out from other creatures of the sea, but is, like all animals, under man's control in an anthropocentric creation. On the fifth day of creation, God "create[s] the great sea monsters" along with the every other living creature (Genesis 1:20-21). If Leviathan belongs in the genus of "great sea monsters," his place in creation is the same as every other non-human animal. Thus, Leviathan is placed firmly in man's dominion when God proclaims that man is made "to hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and the cattle and the wild beasts and all the crawling things upon

the earth” (Genesis 1:26).

Elsewhere, Leviathan is God’s enemy—much as in Job’s and Bildad’s understanding early in the Book of Job—and a proof of His power. The psalmist exalts, “You crushed the Leviathan’s heads,/You gave him as food to the desert-folk” (Psalms 74:14). Here, Leviathan is a monstrous false god, whom God destroys and distributes as meat. Leviathan symbolizes both the dangers of the natural world, from which God protects man, and the threat of false gods, who are no match for God’s sway. In Isaiah, God slays Leviathan when He punishes sinners:

The Lord shall come forth from His place
To punish the dwellers of the earth
For their iniquity;
And the earth shall disclose its bloodshed
And shall no longer conceal its slain.
In that day the Lord will punish,
With His great, cruel, mighty sword
Leviathan the Elusive Serpent—
Leviathan the Twisting Serpent. (Isaiah 26:20-27:1)

God slays Leviathan when he punishes the iniquitous; thus, Leviathan here embodies human sin, which flourishes against God until He comes to defeat it. In another psalm, Leviathan is imagined, as in Genesis, as an intentional act of God’s creation and among the reasons to celebrate it:

How many Your deeds, O Lord,
all of them You do in wisdom.
All the earth is filled with Your riches.
This sea great and wide,
where creatures beyond number stir,
the little beasts and the large.
There the ships go,
this Leviathan You fashioned to play with.
All of them look to You
to give them their food in its season. (Psalms 104:24-27)

Here Leviathan is not explicitly God’s opponent; there is no mention of God attacking or

destroying him. Nevertheless, it is implied that Leviathan is subordinate and subject to humankind. Though Leviathan is a part of creation to be celebrated, apparently among the “deeds” God “do[es] in wisdom,” humankind surpasses him in that human ships traverse his waters. Man is still preeminent. Further, Leviathan, though he is a terror to man, is but a plaything to God, and even if he is a threat to humankind, he still depends upon God for nourishment, like all other animals.

The account of Leviathan in God’s second speech from the whirlwind is a subtle fusion, reworking, and subversion of previous Biblical accounts. Ultimately, it counters the theological perspectives of other parts of the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis, Leviathan is employed to emphasize the anthropocentrism of creation; in Job, the anthropocentrism of creation in Genesis is rejected: here, Leviathan is not placed under human control, but rather “has no match on earth” and is “king over all proud beasts” (Job 41:25-26). God made the world for Leviathan as much as for man; thus, it is presumptuous that the actions of human beings should govern the events of the natural world, for they are not preeminent in it. The Leviathan of Isaiah, a manifestation of sin that God will wipe out, is subverted in Job: the suggested theological framework of Job denies that it is God’s role to wipe out sin; rather, God is concerned about the entire natural order of creation, of which man, righteous or sinful, is one minor part. Psalm 104 emphasizes the human ability to navigate Leviathan’s waters, while the account in Job highlights Leviathan’s dominance; no person could stand up to him. In Job, God emphasizes his distance from man in a possible allusion to this psalm: “Could you play with [Leviathan]?” he asks Job (Job 40:20). God emphasizes that Leviathan is His to play with, not humankind’s. God also responds to Job’s one direct reference to Leviathan: Job had referred

to the day-hexers as “ready to rouse Leviathan”; God says of Leviathan, “No fierce one could arouse him” (in the Hebrew, the verbs here translated “rouse” and “arouse” are identical) (Job 3:8; 41:2). God emphasizes that Leviathan is beyond any created being’s control, in contrast to the assumptions made in the previously quoted Genesis passage. By means of His description of Leviathan, God subverts what Leviathan means. He fundamentally denies that His creation is anthropocentric, and thereby disillusion Job of the notion that God is just in a way that is understandable to humankind.

Part III: God Reclaims the Mythological

God’s response to Job begins with a description of the inanimate, natural world, continues by detailing the animal kingdom, and concludes with accounts of the mythological Behemoth and Leviathan. The former two comprise God’s first speech; the final part is His second. It is striking that God’s response to Job goes beyond the natural world at all. The first speech deals exclusively with the world as Job or any human being could potentially view it. The sea and rain are real things in the natural world, as are lions, ravens, oxen, and the rest of God’s creation that we are familiar with. Behemoth and Leviathan, on the other hand, are supernatural.

The theological implications of God’s Leviathan, as discussed in Part II, do not in themselves demand a mythological account. As it is, much of the first speech deals with these themes, at least preparing for their elaboration in the second speech. God implicitly suggests a non-anthropocentric creation simply by omitting human beings from His account of nature. He emphasizes it further by anthropomorphizing the sea, calling the clouds “its swaddling bands” (Job 38:9). God cares for the non-living sea as a parent for its child, and He speaks of

thunderstorms “rain[ing] on a land without man”; the fact that God cares for the world devoid of humankind calls into question whether human beings are His priority (Job 38:26). This questioning of anthropocentrism continues in the zoological account, when God questions whether man can “rely on [the wild ox] with his great power/and leave [man’s] labor to him” and claims that the horse “ignores the trumpet’s sound” (Job 39:11; 39:24). These claims imply that, contrary to popular belief, neither beast is truly under human control. The ostrich “leaves her eggs on the ground” and “forgets that a foot can crush them,” because “God made her forgetful of wisdom” (Job 39:14-17). If, as this speech has so far suggested, the world is not anthropocentric, then God’s being just would require that He regard *all* created beings justly. However, if God created a world such that the ostrich’s eggs can and will be arbitrarily destroyed, then God’s justice seems to be beyond human understanding.

Clearly the themes at the heart of the mythological account are present in God’s first speech. Thus, the mythological account cannot be necessary to address the theological subject matter. Why, then, does the author of Job involve the mythological at all in what is arguably the climactic moment both of God’s speech and the Book of Job as a whole? The account of Leviathan in God’s second speech is unique among Biblical accounts in that it comes from the mouth of God Himself. Elsewhere, Leviathan is invoked by the author of Genesis, the psalmist, Isaiah, Job, and Bildad; only here does God describe him. Perhaps the author of Job is having God reclaim the mythological. Perhaps man, in making myths, misunderstands himself to be a creator. Human beings encroach on God’s territory, and they do so imperfectly in two respects: rather than create from nothing, they abstract and elevate (as Leviathan is related to the snake and the crocodile), and they abstract in a manner limited by the human mind. The binary

mythical constructions evoked by Job and Bildad miss the subtlety of God's nuanced picture of Leviathan. Moreover, Job's and Bildad's myths moralize; God describes Leviathan's greatness but is unconcerned with his goodness. God's portrait of Leviathan is not the typical human one, thus demonstrating humans' ineptitude in using myth.

Both of God's speeches rebuke human pride; each is filled with rhetorical questions calling into question what Job knows or can do. Nevertheless, Job is not explicitly prideful. Like his accusers, Job hastens to admit that he cannot understand God, but he may not fully understand what his ignorance means. If mythologizing is an imperfect, interpretive creation, then using it to make claims about God and His ways—as do Job, Bildad, and earlier Biblical accounts—is a prideful reduction of God to human terms. Here emerges a new facet of God's question to Job, "Could you play with [Leviathan]?" (Job 40:20). Job and his accusers have been figuratively playing with Leviathan—and the mythological generally—by using their limited, human creations to understand God.

By delivering this theological rebuke in mythological terms, God's critique is focused not on the codified theology that Job (before his suffering) and his accusers believe, but rather on the presumptuous, flawed, human manner of understanding God that underlies it. Whether or not Job and his accusers are familiar with the Hebrew Bible, there are prior Biblical accounts to support their beliefs—Psalm 1 ("the Lord embraces the way of the righteous,/and the way of the wicked is lost"), Psalm 62 ("You reward everyone according to what they have done"), and Deuteronomy 11 (in which God says He will provide for the Israelites "if [they] indeed heed [His] commands," but, if they do not obey, that His "wrath [will] flare against" them). Perhaps by reclaiming the mythological, God points to a way in which all these views are based on a

simplified understanding of Him, exemplified in the simple myths of Job and Bildad.

By illustrating the natural world for Job before turning to the mythological, God may mean to remove from Job's eyes the interpretive lens of myth. Perhaps God is implying that human beings have failed to take an honest look at the world. If they do, they will see what God shows Job in His first speech: a stupefying order both kind and cruel that can be neither simplified nor moralized. God shows that humans should look to the world without interpretation in order to understand Him, to whatever limited degree is possible. Otherwise, humans look at the world as already interpreted to be focused on themselves and thus coherent with human ethics. Such an approach irresponsibly presumes that human binaries, myths, archetypes, and systematic relations can apply to God.

Part IV: The Layers of Job's Education

Job's reply to God's speeches gives insight into how he has been educated over the course of the book. The response begins with a statement he could easily have made at the beginning of the book. He confirms God's omnipotence, just as he and his accusers have throughout their speeches: "I know You can do anything/and no devising is beyond You" (Job 42:2). After quoting God's reprimand from the beginning of His first speech for "obscuring counsel without knowledge," Job admits a fault, that he "told but did not understand,/wonders beyond [him] that [he] did not know" (Job 42:3). He follows this admission with another quotation of the beginning of God's speech: "Let me ask you that you may inform me" (Job 42:4). Thus, Job acknowledges his ignorance and cedes to God.

Ultimately, these lines simply amount to Job's acceptance that God is right and he is wrong; however, it is unclear what exactly Job is accepting until the final lines of his response,

when he says, “By the ear’s rumor I heard of You,” he tells God, “and now my eye has seen You./Therefore do I recant./And I repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6). Clearly, Job is not speaking literally: he has heard the voice of God from a whirlwind, but he has not seen Him. However, God’s speeches are both distinctly imagistic. In form the speeches are both a series of rhetorical questions, but in content they are vivid, predominately visual illustrations. Nevertheless, it is not as if God has shown Job anything he has not in some sense seen before. The workings of the natural world are available to Job, and he is not unfamiliar with Behemoth or Leviathan. However, Job has not just seen the images God has provided; he has also seen his own suffering. Thus, there are three successive layers to Job’s education: the suffering of human beings (via Job’s own suffering), the amorality of the natural world (via God’s first speech), and the power of myth to shape, limit, and undermine humankind’s interpretation of the first two (via God’s second speech).

Job is educated first and foremost by his own suffering, or rather by his failed attempt to square the reality of his suffering with his certainty of his own innocence in accord with the theology of a just God, to which he once held fast. This suffering is the human component of his education. It is essential that he undergo the trauma himself; he admits as much when he despairingly tells his accusers, “I, too, like you, would speak,/were you in my place/I would din words against you/and would wag my head over you” (Job 16:3-4). Seeing how his theology has failed in the face of his situation, his eyes are opened to the situation of humankind. He sees clearly the arbitrariness of events in human lives and the world’s apathy toward the moral interests of human beings. He sees that the just suffer while “the wicked live,/grow rich and gather wealth” and that “the blameless and the wicked [God] destroys” equally (Job 21:7; 9:22).

He sees also that the ultimate truth and significance of human mortality is that “together in the dust [all men] lie,/and the worm will cover them” (Job 21:26). Though it takes Job’s own suffering for him to see it clearly, the arbitrary suffering of human beings, and, moreover, human mortality itself counter the theology of a just God. At one point Job says that after his skin is “flay[ed],” from “[his] flesh [he] shall behold God” (Job 19:26). He nearly admits that his suffering has revealed God to him—visually, even, for it is a beholding—but he says it in the future tense. The suffering alone is insufficient.

Thus, the Book of Job cannot end with Job’s bewilderment in the face of his own suffering. The next part of his education comes with God’s first speech and His account of the natural world. Here Job is impelled to look not only outside his own situation, but also outside the situation of humankind. This speech illustrates how the workings of nature are neither anthropocentric nor moral in themselves; this realization is enough to reduce Job to self-degradation and silence. To God’s first speech, he responds, “Look, I am worthless. What can I say back to You?/My hand I put over my mouth” (Job 40:4). Job’s theological viewpoint has expanded from the naivety that preceded his affliction first to an honest view of the human condition and then to an honest view of the condition of the natural world.

Job’s education is completed by God’s second speech and the mythological account. Job’s eyes are opened at last to the problems involved with his understanding of God. He can thus be released from those underpinnings. Observance of the human condition led him to question his beliefs and to demand answers from God. Observance of the natural world led him to loathe himself and to silence those demands. This final stroke—observance that the beliefs that he had held were founded in deluded myths whose power obscured his vision—

releases Job from those delusions. He realizes that his understanding of God came through misguided rumors. Now, vision cleared, he can truly see humanity, see the natural world, and by means of those visions, see God too.

Job says his vision prompts two actions: he “recant[s]” and “repent[s] in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). Job cannot mean that he simply takes back all he has said throughout the book, for in His immediate response, God says that Job has “spoken rightly of [Him]” (Job 42:7). Job perhaps means that he will take back all he has said prior to the events of the book—those false, mythologically grounded rumors that he has not only heard but spread, as is clear from his claim that he, like his accusers, would have condemned another man in his own situation.

The specification that Job’s repentance is in dust and ashes recalls a number of other images. The most immediate association is with the claim in Genesis that man is made from dust, and that Adam, the very name of the first human being, signifies the earth from which he came (Genesis 2:7). The dust is thus an image of man’s origin, his composition, and his inherent transience, echoed earlier by Job in his realization that the just and the wicked meet the same end, covered by the worm (Job 21:26). The image also recalls two instances at the beginning of the Book of Job: Job’s “sitting among the ashes” after his second affliction and his accusers’ (then perhaps more aptly called his friends) grief-stricken response, in which they tear their garments and “tossed dust on their heads towards the heavens” (Job 2:8; 2:12). Immense suffering invites human beings to make these gestures because it reminds them of their humble origins. Both gestures involve physical contact with dust or ash. This image is a reminder that the mixture of man and dust is not, in fact, heterogeneous. In Genesis, humankind, though of humble origin, is the purpose for which the world was created; here, Job acknowledges the

former in denial of the latter.

Thus, Job's reaction indirectly emphasizes the claims that God has made, but there is still the issue of the action itself: Job repents. Again, because God says that Job has spoken rightly about Him, Job surely does not repent for what he has said. Rather, perhaps, he repents about the human condition. He repents of the horrible state of life, even though it is the truth. Stripped of the mythology underpinning his beliefs, Job is reduced to staring at the reality of the world, to which the only proper response is regret.

Part V: Myth and the Reader's Education

If a key component of Job's education is, as has been suggested, a purging of mythic thinking's influence, it is striking and strange that the Book of Job is itself a myth, or something like it. The Book of Job is structured in this way: a series of speeches in verse cocooned in the frame story, a prose narrative that establishes and includes the scenario in a decidedly mythic fashion. (Chapter 32 also has a prose component that introduces Elihu, but many scholars consider it to be a textual interpolation.) The first line of the frame story, "A man there was in the land of Uz—Job, his name," suggests that what follows is a fable (Job 1:1). In his commentary on his translation, Robert Alter notes that these first four words follow this order in Hebrew fables and a reversed order, "there was a man," in traditional Hebrew narrative ("Job" 11). He notes, too, that the land of Job's origin is not a real geographic location, but rather "a never-never land somewhere to the east" of Israel (Alter "Job" 11). The mythological character of the frame story is furthered with the appearance of mythological figures, "the sons of God" and "the Adversary" (Job 1:6-7). The sons of God, who appear briefly elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis and Psalm 82, are a council of deities. This picture of God standing

before such a council clashes with a strictly monotheistic and wholly Judaic theology. Job is not an Israelite, though he is a monotheist and worships the Israelite God, referred to throughout the book as Yahweh, El, and Shaddai. The image of the Israelite God before a council of His “sons” reflects the same tension inherent in the story of a man who worships this God but is not an Israelite.

The Adversary is the next such mythological character. Nothing is said specifically about what or who he is; we are told only that he comes along with (though he is distinguished from) the sons of God “to stand in attendance before the Lord,” that he has come “from roaming the earth and walking about in it,” and that he suspects Job’s faith to be superficial (Job 1:6-8). God gives the Adversary’s suspicion credence and allows him to afflict Job. Job’s affliction is thus framed in terms of an interaction between God and a truly archetypal opponent, named only by his function. (Whether he is God’s opponent, Job’s opponent, or in fact opposition itself is unclear.) Here, Job’s suffering is a test; the Adversary believes that once Job is stripped of his blessings, he will “curse [God] to [His] face” (Job 1:12; 2:6). However, this set-up, in which God is set against some sinister force, reveals the same simplified, binary thinking as when Job asks if he is Yamm (Leviathan), that God should put a watch on him. Given that the author of Job shows God subverting this sort of binary thinking in His second speech, why does the account of Job’s affliction seem so pat and reductive?

It is not only the set-up of and justification for Job’s suffering that is given in heightened, mythological terms, but also the Book of Job ends in the same fashion. Though there is no mention of the sons of God or the Adversary in the return to the frame story in Chapter 42, the story concludes in a mythic register reminiscent of the first part of the frame story and

strikingly unlike most of the book. The shift is cued structurally by the return to prose and textually in God's dialogue, when He calls Job His "servant," a word that has not been used since God's description of Job to the Adversary (Job 42:8; 1:8). The vivid physicality of the poetic speeches returns to the distant narrative of the frame story. When God restores Job's fortunes, it is with the numerical play characteristic of a folk tale: God "increase[s] twofold all that Job had" (Job 42:11). Further, the very fact that Job is rewarded recalls the mythic justification for his suffering offered by the opening of the frame story. If God's speeches deny that the world was made for man and that He is just in a way understandable to man, then Job's suffering is necessarily arbitrary; it is not in any way of God's concern. However, in the logic of the frame story, the suffering is a test, devised by the Adversary but agreed to by God, that Job passes and for which he is rewarded. There is a strong tension in this apparent contradiction between the mythological framing of Job's suffering and the content of the speeches it spurs.

These uses of the mythological in the Book of Job are coherent if the book is examined as presenting a transformation of myths and their interpretation. Perhaps the simple explanation of Job's suffering as God's wager with the Adversary intentionally stands out as incommensurable with the more nuanced interpretation of suffering in the speeches. The reader may at first accept the beginning of the frame story as sensible, but as the speeches progress, the account becomes unsatisfactory. Although Job's complaint is grounded in his own situation, it is, after all, about the arbitrariness of success and suffering of humanity in general. Even if Job's suffering is accounted for in the frame story, that is no answer to the questions Job ultimately raises. The reader is prompted to notice that the kind of explanation the beginning

of the book offers is insufficient for a satisfactory understanding of God and the human condition.

This realization occurs, though, through the universalizing of Job's situation; it is a different sort of myth from the one presented by God and the Adversary. Job's suffering is easily universalized because of its completeness and its terrible intensity. In this way, Job's suffering is mythic—it is archetypal, it is suffering itself—and Job is himself an archetype of innocence. Job is unequivocally blameless, unlike other central Biblical heroes like Moses (who in anger destroyed the tablets given him by God) or David (who commits adultery with Bathsheba). Nevertheless, while Job's suffering is extraordinary, it does not come across as unbelievable. This fact reveals the archetypal nature of human thought. Job's suffering is immediately relatable and understandable to human beings because every human being has suffered, and every human being understands his own suffering as suffering itself; likewise, every human being has been innocent and understands his own innocence as innocence itself. Thus, the story of an archetypal innocent man undergoing archetypal suffering is the very picture of every human being's suffering, though no human being is innocent like Job or suffers as he does.

The author of the Book of Job acknowledges humankind's dependence on mythological and archetypal thinking. This dependence is not necessarily bad, but the Book of Job cautions readers against letting this thinking lead to prideful, human assumptions about the ways God can be understood. If the explanation of Job's suffering as a wager between God and the Adversary is an example of abusing the mythological, using Job's suffering to understand our own is an example of using it correctly. Perhaps, then, this evolution of the status of myth is

meant to open the reader's mind to understanding the end of the frame story as something other than God rewarding Job for speaking rightly. A more nuanced reading could show that the importance of this fable-like conclusion is that, despite his suffering and God's undermining of his way of thinking, Job continues to live and is able to thrive again. He endures misery but ultimately survives and goes on to live a full, happy life. The Book of Job educates its readers not only to question the roots of their own archetypal thinking about God, but also to strive toward a more nuanced consideration and interpretation of the myths this archetypal thinking produces.

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