

IS LEVI-STRAUSS A JEWISH MYSTIC?

The question which I have chosen as a title for this essay is not concerned with the accident of birth which made Lévi-Strauss a Jew; whether or not this fact has influenced his work is a matter outside my concern. Nor do I intend (at least directly) to take up Leach's recent (1970: p. 18 and passim) hints that Lévi-Strauss's later work has crossed the boundary between science and metaphysics. Rather I propose to suggest certain features of the literature of Jewish mysticism which are so amenable to structural analysis that at times they give the impression that the texts themselves have been invented by a structuralist manufacturing a prototype mythology for analysis. Since this is not the case, I intend to adduce the existence of the Jewish mystic material as evidence for the usefulness of the structural method in the analysis of material from 'higher' as well as 'primitive' religions. I shall also inquire (though necessarily in a limited way) into the question of whether the usefulness of similar techniques in investigating primitive and civilized religions indicates a similarity sufficient to make the comparative study of religious systems a simpler (or at least more rewarding) project than might otherwise be the case.

Analysis of Jewish religious forms within the tradition stretching from the sociology of Durkheim to current structuralism is, of course, not unheard of. Durkheim, Mauss, and Hertz all cited examples from Judaism (and Hinduism and Christianity, for that matter) with no hint that it was necessary to view these examples in any different light from examples drawn from primitive tribes. Within a very different comparative tradition, Frazer did the same thing. Among the modern structuralists, Leach (1969) and Mary Douglas (1966) have produced significant applications of the structural method to the understanding of aspects of the Old Testament. Yet Leach, unlike Durkheim, has been forced to explain and justify his use of Judaic material. A good deal of the opposition to Leach's use of Old Testament texts as sources seems to stem from his disregard for chronology. As Leach points out (1969: p. 28), 'Myth proper lacks a chronology in any strict sense, for the beginning and the end must be apprehended simultaneously: significance is to be discerned only in the relations between the component parts of the story; sequence is simply a persistent re-arrangement of elements which are present from the start.' Leach anticipates (and receives) objections to this view from those who believe the Bible to represent, in some sense, 'true' history. This is a matter of faith, which it is not the province of an anthropologist to question and which is, by and large, irrelevant to theoretical considerations. There is, however, a seemingly less emotional case sometimes made for a fundamental difference between the concepts of history and of time implicit in Judaism and Christianity and those found in primitive religion. Eliade, particularly, has observed such a crucial difference between what he calls the 'cyclical' time of 'archaic' religion and the 'irreversible' time of Judaism. The wrath expressed by God at the fall of Samaria, he says, is not the 'same wrath' expressed when Jerusalem falls (1961: pp. 110-111). As to Eliade's first point, there is a good case to be made out for a strong 'cyclical' element in Jewish concepts of time. Judaism, like any other religion has a ritual calendar which is repeated year after year, and which has survived amazingly unchanged through centuries of the most cataclysmic upheavals in the circumstances of the Jewish people. Moreover, the ongoing chronicle of the Jews was never conceived as leading eventually to a total halt. The Messiah, after all, would bring with him a new era of peace, justice, and felicity and (since the Diaspora) a return of the Jews to the promised land. One is tempted to say that, just as the Biblical narrative begins in a state of paradise, it is in such a state that it conceives its eventual end. Surely this aspect of Hebrew Messianism can be termed, in some sense, a 'reversal' of time. Moreover, Leach himself has argued, quite convincingly, the case for a fundamental tension between linear and cyclical time in all types of religious systems (1961: pp. 124-136.).

Eliade, however, covers himself against this objection by the second half of his statement, in which he sees a lack of 'sameness' between comparable but not identical Biblical episodes. If 'same' is to be interpreted in so strict a way, one is immediately tempted to inquire how 'same' are similar episodes, or even repetitions of episodes in primitive bodies of myth. Although

Eliade has not been involved in the controversy over Leach's Old Testament analyses, such an insistence upon identity between episodes upon whose comparability structural analysis depends would serve, once and for all, to put paid to all such analysis, not only that relating to Biblical materials. Absolute equivalence in myth is by nature an unprovable. However, neither Leach nor any other structuralist makes such an extreme claim for their comparisons. The juxtaposition of mythical episodes is justified only if one can, thereby, discover a level upon which they exhibit, in some respect or other, a hitherto unsuspected similarity. Whether the methods used to discern such similarities is in sufficiently close touch with the contents of the myths themselves is, of course, an important aspect of the argument between pro and anti-structuralists, even when structuralists are perverse enough to call themselves functionalists (Leach, 1970: p. 9). The argument rages whether the material is taken from primitive or from Biblical sources, and one can, in the last resort, only fall back upon one's own satisfaction with the results produced, or lack thereof, in deciding one's own side of the fence. One of the features of Jewish mysticism which particularly attracted me to its study is that it seems to offer something approaching a resolution of this dilemma, or at least an instance where the facts themselves are so incontrovertibly co-terminal with the system (to paraphrase Dumézil) that the most extreme doubters of the validity of the structural method will, at least, be forced to do some quick thinking to explain away this example.

In Jewish mysticism we are faced with an extreme case of a technique used in more orthodox Jewish theology of seeking meaning in Biblical passages by juxtaposition of diverse Biblical texts on the grounds of hidden logical similarities. These efforts sometimes cause the most seasoned follower of Lévi-Strauss to wonder if the texts can possibly be genuine! In the Zohar, the fundamental text of Jewish mysticism, first circulated in the thirteenth century, a passage on a statement from, say, Genesis, is likely to involve us with characters and incidents from such scattered sources as Exodus, Deuteronomy, Leviticus and the Psalms. The logic involved is often quite complicated, and related to the total structure of the Zohar as well as to conventional notions in Judaism and it is for this reason that I cannot quote an example in this small space. I can, however, quote examples of an even more interesting feature of Jewish mysticism, its tendency to express itself in series of dualities, reminiscent of the chains of structural oppositions perceived by Lévi-Strauss and his followers in tribal material. But while the oppositions discovered by anthropologists in primitive material are sometimes of such a nature that the non-believer sees them as forced, the literature of Jewish mysticism is a gold-mine of symbolic opposites, in this case undoubtedly direct from the 'native's pen, if not his mouth.

What more could Lévi-Strauss himself ask for than the opening statement of the Zohar? Referring to the 'lily among thorns' of the 'Song of Songs', we are told that the lily symbolizes the Community of Israel, for 'as the lily among thorns is tinged with red and white, so the Community of Israel is visited now with justice and now with mercy.' (Zohar, Vol. I, p. 4). And so it goes for five volumes; we meet with all our friends: left and right, male and female, up and down, fire and water, etc., all explicitly compared both to each other and to such abstract dualities in Jewish theology as justice and mercy, unity and disunity of God, holiness and impurity. Moreover, the author does not rest until he has included the whole Bible and the great body of Jewish ritual law within his terminology, and done so in a remarkably consistent way. I do not know whether the analysis of the Old Testament is valid; what I do know, is that a believer in a religion has, in order to make his religion more meaningful to himself and his circle of co-thinkers, ordered it in terms which allow me to admit his results to the body of material subjected to structural analysis, without having to superimpose upon it any great number of logical oppositions which are not explicitly there to begin with. And the Zohar is not simply the work of an individual genius (or madman), for almost all its material, if not its total system, is traditional.

If I may be allowed the unscholarly indulgence of a generalization from a single example, perhaps Lévi-Strauss's descent into 'metaphysic' represents no more than an apprehension of how much metaphysical thought (which is, after

all, the object of myth) is likely to proceed, whether or not this is immediately evident to the observer. Or has the great man been secretly poring over his grandfather's books?

Hariet Lyons

Bibliography

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The edition of the Zohar used is the English translation by Simon, Sperling and Levertoff published in New York and London by the Soncino Press at various dates between 1932 and 1934.