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Myth and Punishment

"The gods created the world…"[1] and then it only got worse. This is a very brief summary of the content of mythological stories about the creation of the world that arose in various cultural systems independently of each other. After the world came into being and the first humans appeared, stories about the fall of the human race are a common motif in mythological narratives. Successive generations are always worse than those that preceded them. God, or the gods, send successive punishments on mankind for failing to live up to their expectations and not growing up to what they have been given and destined to do. The mythological motif of sin and punishment is a fascinating area of theological and ethical inquiry, provoking numerous questions about the nature of god/gods, about the nature of the source and causes of the existence of evil, questions about the nature of human beings, about the meaning of freedom, and about the existence (or lack) of human free will. But it is also an opportunity to ask what punishment is in mythology, what its meaning is, what its source is, and what legitimizes it. Moreover, the presence of punishment themes in ancient mythologies raises questions about the significance of ancient mythologies for the contemporary understanding of law and justice, and the principles of the functioning of modern societies.

Interest in mythologies as systems of ideas about the world of various peoples dates back to ancient times. Since ancient times, foreign myths have been treated

[1] Two caveats are necessary at the outset of this article. First, in this article I treat myths as narrative stories, without attempting to analyse their theological layer. Second, for the purposes of my article, significant simplifications were necessary, mainly because of the fact that in the case of individual cultures it is difficult to speak of the existence of a single and coherent set of stories that could be defined as, for example, Egyptian, Greek, Norse, or African mythology. Mythologies are collections of various stories, multi-threaded, and often contradictory, as the authors of anthologies devoted to the mythologies of particular peoples, cultures, or civilizations unanimously point out. In the case of societies defined as ancient, that is, those that existed over hundreds or thousands of years, it must be remembered that at various times individual cities, regions, and even individual social groups had their own myths (mythological systems), and the mutual relations between them, sometimes peaceful, and sometimes hostile, do not make it possible to formulate unequivocal statements about the myths of a given people. With both reservations in mind, in this article, when I use terms such as "Greek mythology" or "Egyptian mythology," I refer to the content of individual myths, collected and elaborated in anthologies devoted to given peoples.

as a kind of curiosity illustrating naivety or stupidity, or at best, merely a difference in the way barbarians think.[2] Foreign myths were contrasted with one's own myths, which were treated as true stories, told to real people by their only true gods. With the rise of their modern study, myths began to be seen as more than just strange tales told by alien peoples. Anthropological reflection on the knowledge systems of various societies, dating back to the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has made it possible to distinguish universal features of mythological narratives that are independent of the culture of the communities that are their owners.

First, mythological stories are commonly distinguished from other types of narratives (that is, fairy tales, legends, riddles, historical tales, etc.).[3] We must remember this when we use the concept of myth today: we treat this type of story as a kind of fiction, as something untrue and not entirely serious, failing to notice that in societies defined as traditional (pre-literate), myths had the status of sacred stories, and therefore true stories, which distinguished them from fairy tales or legends invented for the entertainment of listeners.[4] What the myths said was treated with reverence and seriousness as indisputable truth, different from that of any type of stories invented by people. Myths carried a transcendent message that went beyond everyday experience. This is the source of their second significant feature: myths were treated as a sacred pattern of knowledge about the world, and thus as a pattern of action for people living in this world.[5] The function of myths was to explain all natural, moral, and social phenomena that went beyond individual experience. Knowledge of a given body of myths, specific to a particular collective, formed what has been termed a "collective soul."[6]

In concepts referring to psychology as broadly understood, myths have been interpreted as an expression of unconscious thinking, reflecting archetypes and symbols present in the human psyche;[7] as universal structures of thinking, including thinking in terms of opposition (that is, good and evil, sacred and profane, night and day, masculine and feminine);[8] and as a reflection of thinking about society, including the existence of a social structure (reflecting its tripartite division: those who rule, those who fight, and those who work).[9] Thus, the facts presented in mythological stories had the status of knowledge about the world, socially shared and respected, presented and reproduced through numerous ceremonies and rituals. Hence the common concern for the faithful transmission of their content and meanings, but also

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2 J. Frazer, *Złota gałąź*, transl. H. Krzeczkowski, Warszawa 1962.

3 B. Malinowski, *Mit, magia, religia. Dzieła*, vol. 7, Warszawa 1990.

4 *Ibid*.

5 M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, transl. J. Wierusz-Kowalski, 2nd ed., Łódź 1993.

6 E. Durkheim, *Elementarne formy życia religijnego*, transl. A. Zadrożyńska, Warszawa 1990.

7 C. Jung, *Archetypy i symbole*, transl. J. Prokopiuk, Warszawa 1993.

8 C. Lévi-Strauss, *Struktura mitów* [in:] *idem*, *Antropologia strukturalna*, transl. K. Pomian, Warszawa 2000, pp. 185–216.

9 G. Dumézil, *Bogowie Germanów. Szkice o kształtowaniu się religii skandynawskiej*, transl. A. Gronowska, Warszawa 2006; see also: M. Składankowa, *Georges Dumézil i trójdzielny paradygmat mitycznej wyobraźni*, "Literatura na Świecie" 1987, no. 11(196), pp. 321–331.

the concern to observe the rules transmitted through myths, which were given the status of sacred stories. In this sense, myths became the source and justification for the entire law of a given community and, importantly, a socially accepted justification for moral assessments of actions undertaken by individuals, including a specific system of punishments and rewards related to compliance with the sanctified law by individuals belonging to a given community.

Myths legitimized the existing social order by referring to tradition, which made it possible to treat the norms and principles they expressed as going beyond the human understanding of justice. Therefore, what was passed down "from eternity" became "divine" law. What is important is that the assessment of specific actions of people living in a given society as "good" or "evil" was treated, at least in principle, as independent of the people in power and/or acting as judges (in myths often identified with the ruler). The common knowledge of divine laws, principles, and norms, conveyed in the form of a mythological story, made it possible, at least theoretically, to treat the court as an impartial institution, safeguarding the observance of laws that were earlier than any laws established by humans. The Torah (that is, "Law") is an example; it is a collection of sacred mythological stories, written down in Five Books after centuries of oral transmission;[10] it established the legal basis for the social organization of the nation of Israel in subsequent centuries up to the present day.

To put it differently and in anticipating further analysis, myths described the principles of social organization and formed the foundation of thinking about the world (a worldview) in which the concepts of order and harmony were central categories. Myths clearly defined what should be considered fair and provided a justification for possible punishments applied to those who acted contrary to the norms resulting from the truth of the myth, as well as a basis for possible rewards for those who acted in accordance with the accepted pattern. It is worth noting that in mythological stories there are individual heroes, often referred to as righteous persons, who defend order and justice, and their attitude is described as a model worth imitating. On the other hand, their actions are contrasted with the rest of humanity, that is, the mass actions of those who universally break recognised patterns and norms of behaviour.

In order to explain the relationship between myths and law, it is worth looking at three groups of mythological narratives that arose in various parts of the world (largely independently of each other, we can assume) and that express universal truths about social life and about the way law is understood. It is worth paying attention to the myths about the creation of the world, myths about the fall of man, and myths about the end of the world. Myths about the beginning of the world should be treated as stories about the emergence of a model for the legal system and the justification of the concept of justice; myths about the fall of man should be treated as narratives about those who violate the established order (violate the law and act against justice); and myths about the end of the world should be treated as stories about the inevitability of punishment for all wrongdoers and a possible reward for the chosen

[10] J. Barton, *Historia Biblii. Księga i jej religie*, transl. A. Kunicka, Warszawa 2022.

and righteous. Importantly, even a very cursory and necessarily simplified review of such mythological tales indicates significant similarities in their narrative structures and the similarity of the content they express.[11] The content, as I demonstrate, is of fundamental importance for understanding contemporary attitudes towards law, punishment, and justice.

1. The creation of the world

Most mythological stories about the creation of the world follow a similar scenario, which is noted by all researchers dealing with the comparative analysis of mythology. From non-existence (chaos) appears something which initiates the creation of something, some distinguished place in space from which the sky and the earth arise, air and water appear separating different dimensions of existence, and then creatures appear to inhabit the created world. What is significant among these first beings is that some being (or demiurge, god, force, or man) appears, whose attribute is the establishment of law that will be binding on all subsequent beings and emerging creatures. In most myths, the appearance of humans is the result of the actions of a god or gods, which, in turn, leads the gods to expect humans to act in accordance with the purpose and principles revealed to them by the gods. But things quickly begin to get complicated when, just as quickly, someone appears who challenges the established order.

In Near Eastern mythologies, the way in which the world came into being has consequences for all subsequent events, until its predicted end. Sumerian, Babylonian, and Old Testament myths (Akkadian, Aramaic, and Canaanite) combine, interpenetrate, and correspond with each other, creating a puzzle, difficult to interpret, that we try to decipher from the few surviving religious texts created in that area. In Sumerian mythology, the primordial ocean is the beginning and creator of everything, from which emerges the cosmic mountain An-Ki, which is both heaven and earth at the same time. From the union of heaven and earth the god Enlil (protector of the city of Nipur) is born, who in one of his first acts disturbs the established divine order by seducing the grain goddess Ninlil. Together with his wife, he is sentenced by his father to wander the underworld. Thanks to a trick, together with the children born in the underground, she comes to the surface, giving light to the world at that moment: first the moon goddess and then the sun god. Significantly, Enlil disrupts the established order, but his achievements surpass those of his father An and he becomes the chief god of the Sumerians. He is considered the creator of humanity and the one who gives it the ability to work the land. Babylonian mythology is similar in its structure: Marduk, the son of the god of wisdom Ea and the goddess Enki (in other versions Damkina), surpasses the power of his father, the god of wisdom. He puts the world in

[11] Cf. E. Cassirer, *Mit i religia* [in:] *idem*, *Esej o człowieku. Wstęp do filozofii kultury*, transl. A. Staniewska, Warszawa 1998, p. 139.

order, creates man from a killed deity, gives people magic, knowledge, and all kinds of skills; in other words, he is the model of a perfect ruler. The kings of Babylon ruled in his name over the peoples under their control, building temples and performing annual rituals that perpetuated his rule over the world.[12] It is significant that in many belief systems that developed in the Middle East, the king, who was the representative of God on earth, was at the same time the high priest, but also the high judge, ensuring that divine laws were observed and adjudicating any potential disputes in accordance with this law.[13]

In Egyptian mythology (in the version created in Hermopolis), one of the first figures to appear after the world emerges from nothingness is the goddess Ma'at. She is the goddess of law, justice and harmony, daughter of the god Re, and wife of the god Thoth (the god of wisdom). She does not occupy a prominent place in the pantheon(s) of Egyptian deities, although her role in the belief system was significant. Among her many attributes is an ostrich feather, symbolic of the power to judge and also a sign of judges. During the Old Kingdom, judges were called priests of Ma'at. Moreover, the concept of "*ma'at*" itself denotes not only a specific person/being, but above all the main principle governing the world. In this meaning, *ma'at* means the harmony necessary for the existence of the world, a specific power that prevents the world created by the god Re from returning to the times of primordial chaos. The feather motif appearing in Egyptian art is a symbolic reminder that the rules established in the beginning must always be followed. The pharaoh was responsible for maintaining law and order; together with the priests representing him, he offered a daily sacrifice to goddess Ma'at, and in the event of any natural disasters or disturbances, Ma'at was called upon to restore order and harmony to the world.[14]

In ancient Greece, one of the first figures to come into being after the creation of the world, according to the common scenario of mythological stories, was Themis (protector of law, justice, and harmony).[15] She was created from the union of Gaia and Uranus and belonged to the generation of the Titans (giants), the first beings born from this union. Then the Cyclopes, the hundred-handed gods and men arise. Like the Egyptian Ma'at, Themis does not become the heroine of her own myths, but appears as a secondary figure in many other stories. It is worth noting that Themis is one of the few Titans to survive the turbulent and extremely brutal period in which the world is formed. This testifies to the importance attributed to the guardian of primordial law, harmony, and order in subsequent mythical eras of human development. One could

[12] It is worth noting that it was against this authority that the biblical Abraham (Abram) rebels, leading his people out of Babylonian captivity; cf. R. Graves, R. Patai, *Mity hebrajskie. Księga Rodzaju*, transl. R. Gromacka, Warszawa 2002, pp. 144–147.

[13] G. Dumézil, *Bogowie Germanów…*

[14] For extensive commentary on the idea (concept) of Ma'at, see: J. Assmann, *Maat. Sprawiedliwość i nieśmiertelność w starożytnym Egipcie*, transl. A. Niwiński, Warszawa 2019. See also: G. Rachet, *Słownik cywilizacji egipskiej*, transl. J. Śliwa, Katowice 1994, p. 191.

[15] For more on the myths related to Themis, see the following part of this article, which is based on R. Graves, *Mity greckie*, transl. H. Krzeczkowski, Kraków 2022 and Z. Kubiak, *Mitologia Greków i Rzymian*, Kraków 2022.

say that her role in myths is to remind various heroes of the existence of laws that must not be broken, because acts that violate them always and unconditionally have disastrous consequences.

In the mythological narrative presented in the Old Testament writings and continued in the New Testament, the world comes into being by the will of God, according to His purpose and His words, prior to any material manifestation of His will. The creation of the world is an independent work of God the creator, and the history of humans begins *de facto* with an act of disobedience to divine principles. Everything that happens next can be presented, in great simplification, as a constantly occurring conflict between God, who reminds us of the existence of the Law, and people, who break these laws. The plot of the following biblical stories is similar: God establishes or confirms the law, but the people do not obey it; a righteous one appears who saves the people from a final catastrophe; the people promise to improve and obey the divine law, but soon after they stop obeying it… and history repeats itself several times in different variants.

It is worth noting that the source material concerning the oldest cosmogonic myths (about the creation of the world) is extremely scanty and at the same time difficult to interpret. The point is that these myths deal with extremely abstract issues that can be expressed using symbols, concepts, and languages whose meanings we are not always able to reconstruct and understand. Similar difficulties had to be faced by those who transformed orally transmitted myths into a document (written, depicted in a picture or sculpture) that has survived to modern times. Authors analysing cosmogonic myths point out that in stories about the creation of the world, abstract primordial forces and gods are replaced by a conventional second generation of gods. The creator gods are replaced by gods who rule over the world and act in this world.[16] The original principles that develop along with the emerging world in all mythologies become personified: gods appear whose main attribute is the protection of the observance of law. In the mythologies of the Near East, ancient Egypt, and ancient Greece, these oldest gods, creators of the world, are forgotten or marginalized and replaced by god-rulers whose main task is to ensure compliance with the originally established law. This transformation occurs not only in the most famous myths of Eurasian antiquity. In Inca mythology, the central figure is god Inti (Father of the Sun), considered the creator of the royal dynasty and of the entire Inca people. As the creator (father) of the Inca civilization, he was considered the creator of law, order, and social order, the maintenance of which was to be ensured by the sacrifices offered to him.

Those in power (including the power to judge) are treated as those who derive their prerogatives from divine endowment. But despite all the majesty attributed to their person, despite the numerous rituals and ceremonies associated with the person of the king, the actions they undertake are not always related to the realization of divine laws and principles. Myths feature good and bad rulers, and the mythological

[16] E. Eliade, *Historia wierzeń i idei religijnych*, vol. 1: *Od epoki kamiennej do misteriów eleuzyńskich*, transl. S. Tokarski, Warszawa 1988.

scenarios describing the conflicts between them are remarkably similar, regardless of the part of the world in which the myths were created. Where bad kings rule, most often usurpers who, through cunning or magic tricks, have taken over power that is not theirs, the world described seems to scream about the injustice taking place. In such a world, people have no defender, humanity is threatened by monsters, and various disasters, plagues and catastrophes occur; nature does not develop and humanity is threatened by the spectre of famine and wars. The restoration of law and order is associated with the appearance of a hero, initially unaware of his destiny, who, thanks to his righteousness and deeds in accordance with the eternal order, attains power at the end of the mythological story. Importantly, the legitimacy of his path to power is confirmed by the support provided to him by ordinary people and forces of nature such as trees, animals, and birds. This is to symbolize a kind of approval from higher forces given to the hero for acting in accordance with divine law. The bad king is defeated, whereas the good one lives happily ever after.[17]

This mythical pattern of good triumphing over evil is repeated in countless stories that are part of the contemporary canon of popular culture, from the stories of Gilgamesh and Moses, the story of King Piast,[18] the stories of the Knights of the Round Table,[19] the stories told by Tolkien[20] and C.S. Lewis,[21] and the story of Luke Skywalker told in the *Star Wars* saga. What these stories have in common is the triumph of good, legitimized by conduct consistent with principles that are earlier (and higher) than those laws that have been introduced and imposed by those currently in power in a contingent manner and are therefore contrary to unchanging ideas of justice. It can be said that these ancient and contemporary stories about the struggle between good and evil reflect a mythological archetype, according to which the victory of the good is justified by referring to a law that is earlier, and therefore more important, than the law established at a given moment by the current authorities. Laws made by humans can change, as can judges appointed by authorities to judge what is lawful and what is contrary to the law. However, the stories mentioned here, which belong to popular culture, but are based on ancient heroic myths, indicate that those who appeal to universal principles of justice are always the winners, especially when the law established by judges (the authorities) is in conflict with the laws established by gods.

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17 J. Frazer, *Czarownik, kapłan, król*, transl. I. Wajnberg, Kraków 2024.

18 J. Banaszkiewicz, *Podanie o Piaście i Popielu. Studium porównawcze nad wczesnośredniowiecznymi tradycjami dynastycznymi*, Warszawa 2010.

19 *Opowieści Okrągłego Stołu*, ed. J. Boulenger, transl. K. Dolatowska, T. Komendant, Warszawa 1987.

20 A. Szyjewski, *Od Valinoru do Mordoru. Świat mitu a religia w dziele Tolkiena*, Kraków 2004.

21 C.S. Lewis, *Bóg na ławie oskarżonych*, transl. M. Mroszczak, Warszawa 1993.

2. The fall of man

Creation myths are stories that justify the existence of a pattern in which the world is ordered according to primary and primordial principles of harmony and order. In this sense, these myths are a justification for the existence of moral truths, a pattern that orders the functioning of the world and, at the same time, defines human beings' place in the world and the principles that humanity should follow in its actions (regardless of its place in the social structure).

Another universal thread in mythological stories is the conflict between those who are the guardians of existing laws and the people (or gods) who act against existing rules. In the Mesopotamian myth of Gilgamesh, there is a motif of the fall of humanity associated with the figure of Enkidu, a half-animal hunter, opponent, and later friend of Gilgamesh, who, after discovering his humanity, rebels against the will of the gods and is, therefore, sentenced to death by them. The elaborate story of the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu ends with a second moral: after his friend's death, having understood the meaning of punishment for his evil deeds, Gilgamesh abandons the life of an adventurer and sets off in search of immortality. He finds two types of it: the first is earthly immortality that allows one to remain alive like a snake that is reborn every time it sheds its skin; the second consists in performing good deeds and being remembered in the immortal memory of grateful people.[22]

In numerous mythologies from various parts of the world there is a motif of successive eras of humanity, each of which is worse than the previous one. In Greek, Hindu, Norse, and New World mythology, four periods of human development are distinguished, with each subsequent era considered worse than the previous one. The first age, most often referred to in mythology as golden, is a time of perfect harmony, prosperity, peace, and moral perfection on the part of the people living then. For the Greeks, the last era, the Age of Iron, is a period of decline in morality and growth of evil among humans. In Hindu mythology, the last and current period, referred to as Kali Yuga (that is, the era of the rule of the bloodthirsty goddess Kali) is considered a time of darkness, evil, chaos, and conflict preceding the end of the world.[23] In Norse mythology, similarly, the last and fourth period of humanity's existence is referred to as the Time of Loki, when all the powers of evil take over the world, leading to the destruction of gods and humans. In Aztec mythology, the succession of eras is marked by successive Suns (the Sun of Earth, Wind, Fire, etc.), ruled by other gods and inhabited by other beings whose survival depends on the satisfaction of blood sacrifices made by humans. But none of these sacrifices is able to prevent subsequent catastrophes.[24]

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[22] T. Margul, *Mity sumeryjskie znad ujścia Eufratu i Tygrysu* [in:] *idem*, *Mity z pięciu części świata*, Warszawa 1996.

[23] M. Eliade, *Indyjski symbolizm czasu i wieczności*, transl. K. Kocjan, J. Sieradzan, "Pismo Literacko-Artystyczne" 1986, no. 6–7, pp. 154–167.

[24] M. Frankowska, *Mitologia Azteków*, Warszawa 1987.

Although the biblical story does not divide the world's existence into successive eras in the way found in other mythologies,[25] the vision of the fall of humanity is a central motif of the narrative. The expulsion from Paradise, the Deluge, numerous plagues sent by God, and subsequent catastrophes are presented as the consequences of human disobedience to the commands of the Creator. The story ends with the announcement of the Last Judgment, which will affect all of humanity and each individual. Every action will be evaluated and every person will receive an appropriate punishment or reward.

As Mircea Eliade notes, the universality of the deluge myth can be explained by the phenomenon of diffusion, but the interpretative key to its dissemination is the symbolic universalism of its content. He notes that most deluge myths, including the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical story, are part of a cosmic rhythm in which the old world inhabited by fallen humanity is submerged in water, and sometime later, out of the watery chaos, a new world emerges. Eliade also states that in a great number of variants the deluge myth indicates that the return to the times of chaos is the result of sins (or ritual errors perpetrated by humanity), and sometimes the expression of the will of a divine being to put an end to humanity. The biblical stories can therefore be presented as successive eras of divine law and subsequent human rebellions.

This necessarily cursory review of selected mythologies of the fall of humanity makes it possible for us to indicate the reasons why mythological humanity is punished by its gods. These punishments are always caused by violations of divine laws, of divine harmony, and of balance. Since the gods are the guardians of such order, punishment for those who violate existing rules and act against laws considered sacred can be seen as a form of justice and an attempt to restore cosmic balance. The function of punishment is therefore to erase the guilt for violating eternal laws, and the administration of justice is aimed at returning to cosmic harmony and/or divine order.

Punishment for evil deeds should also be seen as a kind of moral lesson, intended to persuade people to change their evil behaviour by returning to the path of respect for divine laws. In this case, we can point to a second didactic function of punishment, which can be treated as a warning to all those potentially inclined to rebel against respect for the existing law. Thus, another function of punishment present in the mythologies mentioned, and resulting from the mythological lessons given to wrongdoers, may be its preventive function. Referring to the concepts used in social sciences, one can also say that myths play an important role as tools of social control, indicating specific attitudes and specific ways of behaving towards those who implement them.

[25] A significant moment here is the appearance of the Messiah – expected in the mythological narrative of the Old Testament and accomplished and awaited again in the tradition of the New Testament (cf. G. Pattaro, *Pojmowanie czasu w chrześcijaństwie* [in:] *Czas w kulturze*, ed. A. Zajączkowski, Warszawa 1988, pp. 291–329).

Gods expect laws to be obeyed and, in a sense, test the loyalty of people, checking their devotion, faith, and fealty. Those who in some way act contrary to divine commandments are punished in an exemplary manner, for example, by denying them eternal life, denying them rebirth in the cycle of reincarnation, and denying them grace, divine protection, or prosperity. There is a reward provided for those who act in a manner consistent with divine commandments (in many cases referred to as the righteous). It must be emphasised, however, that in all mythological stories the rewards are given to the few (the chosen or the righteous), while humanity as a whole experiences an inevitable cosmic catastrophe.

What seems extremely important here is the element of human free will, which enables him or her to make choices about his or her own behaviour. At this point, we can only point out that myths tell us what behaviour is appropriate and what behaviour is not. Mythological stories about the fall of humanity indicate very clearly the actions that punishment inevitably follows. In this sense, the quite abstract concept of justice, understood as a violation of divine order and harmony, is precisely specified. Every action has its consequences, and everyone will be judged in his or her own time. And this judgment will take place exactly in the manner the mythological stories say.

3. The end of the world

In all mythologies, the end of the world is presented as a time of reckoning and judgment, in which the deeds of each person will be judged in accordance with the law established at the beginning of the world. It can be said that the rules that apply to every person are obvious and clearly defined, and the references to particular mythological stories are intended to remind us constantly of the consequences of our actions, which will always – in the end – be subject to assessment.

Regardless of the content of the myths in individual communities, it can already be stated at this point that the idea of the institution of the court, and thus the idea of the victory of law and justice, is integrated into the system of mythological thinking about the world, constituting a link connecting the beginning and the end of the world. In biblical mythology, the end of the world is presented as a time of the last judgment announced at the beginning. In other mythologies, too, the end of the world is seen as something obvious and inevitable, something that cannot be stopped. An example of such an event is the Norse Ragnarok, whose arrival is inevitable and independent of the actions of individual people. The end of the world, preceded by the arrival of inevitable evil, will simply come. All humanity and all the gods will participate in it. In other mythologies, although the end of the world is portrayed as inevitable, it can be delayed by the good deeds of all people. It can also be stopped through prayers and sacrifices made by people (including human sacrifices, as mandated by a mythology such as that of the Aztecs).

The inevitability of the end of the world announced in myths leads to an intriguing issue, for the gods destroy the world along with the people they themselves created. Who is to blame for the fact that humans are imperfect because they do not fulfil the will of their creators? It seems that no matter how we answer this question, it is worth paying attention to this aspect of myths, which does not so much concern the punishments that befall evildoers, but points to the rewards that are to be received by those who act in accordance with God's commandments in their lives. Humanity as a whole does not live up to the expectations placed upon it, but there are always heroes in myths who have completely submitted to the laws set by their gods. It can be said of them that they remain faithful to divine laws. As I showed earlier, they are referred to as the righteous, the chosen, or saints. A striking feature of mythical stories is that they are always few in number compared to the whole mass of those who in mythology are defined as sinners, infidels, the perfidious, etc., or simply as being within the general category of humanity. But the reward that is to be granted to these few is also unique and not available to everyone, because following the path marked out by the gods is extremely difficult.

In many mythologies there is an idea of justice identified with the principle of harmony and order (natural harmony, divine order, etc.). In ancient Egypt, it is the principle of *ma'at*, in China it is *tao*,[26] in various variants of Hindu and Buddhist mythology it is karma (dharma),[27] and in Aztec mythology it is *teotl*, understood as the eternal power, the force that keeps the world in harmony. What unites these concepts is the idea behind them that the emerging world is in a state of perfect balance (as opposed to the previous non-being, identical with a state of primordial chaos). The further fate of the world, connected with the appearance of some beings in this world (gods, demons, titans, humans, elves, etc.) disturbs this ideal order. When analysing the content of myths from various communities, we encounter stories that are similar in structure: someone (a god, or most often a human) consciously or unconsciously rebels against the existing norms and principles, causing the world to lose its initial state of balance and harmony. In mythologies, such actions are defined as evil and as such always require a reaction from the forces of good, restoring, in principle, the initial state of happiness. But if we analyse the content of myths further, we encounter the constant decline of humanity and, thus, a gradual drifting away from the original ideal on the part of the world of the reality described.

The Egyptian goddess Ma'at plays an important role during the Judgment of Osiris (also called the Judgment of the Dead). The soul of each deceased, after performing the necessary funeral rites, heads to the afterlife led by the god of the dead, Anubis. There it stands before Osiris and Thoth and confesses its earthly deeds. Osiris, using scales, places the deeds of the deceased on one pan and Ma'at's feather on the other. If the deceased's confession is truthful and the heart unburdened by sins weighs the same as the feather, Osiris leads the deceased to the gates of paradise. If not, if some

[26] M.J. Künstler, *Mitologia chińska*, Warszawa 1985.
[27] M. Jakimowicz-Shah, A. Jakimowicz, *Mitologia indyjska*, Warszawa 1982.

sins of the deceased burden his or her heart, which weighs more than Ma'at's feather, the soul of the sinner is taken by a demonic Devourer in order to annihilate it. The representation of the judgment of the soul of the deceased, with all the symbols illustrating this judicial process, is a common motif in archaeological monuments and ancient Egyptian writing, which testifies to the importance attributed to the Judgment of Osiris as a kind of tool for assessing the conformity of human actions with the principles perceived as the divine harmony of the world.

The figure that connects ancient mythology with modern times is Themis, whose image is a well-known and widely used symbol of courts, justice, and law. Although there are no known specific myths directly related to Themis, her figure appears in many Greek mythological stories. Zygmunt Kubiak points out that her name comes from the Greek *tithemi* (meaning "I set"), which meant order and tidiness, and above all, law established by universal custom.[28] Such law was, therefore, an unchanging customary law, in the literal sense of the word, as distinguished from that established by human legislators. The existence of unwritten, but commonly known, norms and principles in classical Greek was expressed by the phrase *themis esti* ("this is right"), a reference to the name of this goddess.

In addition to her presence in the initial moments of the creation of the world (which she experienced as one of the few beings called into being at that time, which in itself is significant), Themis appears in the Greek deluge myth, when, against the will of Zeus, she resurrects the human race (which, Robert Graves assumes, is a borrowing from earlier Babylonian mythology).[29] She also advises Zeus not to marry the Nereid Thetis, because according to a prophecy her child would surpass its father in power.[30] She appears in one of the variants of the myths concerning the creation of the oracle at Delphi, for after the birth of Phoebus (the god of divination), she feeds him with nectar and ambrosia.[31] She warns Atlas, who is guarding the Hesperides orchard, against Heracles' stealing the golden apples. Her role in these myths is to give advice on proper conduct, but also to predict the future by pointing out to the negative consequences of actions that go against customary law. It can be assumed that Themis' prophetic role consists, on the one hand, in reminding the heroes of myths about the existence of unchanging principles that have been binding on all beings since the beginning of the world and, on the other hand, in pointing out the consequences (that is, the inevitability of punishment) that will befall those who have betrayed the eternal laws which bind gods and people.

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[28] R. Graves, *Mity greckie*… and Z. Kubiak, *Mitologia Greków i Rzymian*…

[29] There are many variants of the Greek deluge myth; in one of them, at the end of the Bronze Age, an angry Zeus sends a cataclysm upon humanity as punishment for the sin of cannibalism. Thanks to the suggestion of Prometheus (the protector of humanity), two righteous persons build an ark which lands on Parnassus, near the oracle of Themis, who gives them an idea on how to regenerate the human race.

[30] Thetis marries Peleus, and from their union Achilles is born, who, according to Homer, was the bravest of warriors. As a hero, he surpasses all men in power, but thanks to Themis' power of prophecy, he does not threaten the power of Zeus.

[31] The oracular temple at Delphi was supposedly dedicated to her, before Apollo took it over.

Today, Themis is associated primarily with three symbols that are intended to characterise the functioning of established legal systems. The scales held in one hand symbolize the justice of the judgments passed, while the sword held in the other hand symbolizes the inevitability of punishment, but also the certainty of the verdicts passed by the courts. Her blindfold is intended to symbolize the impartiality of the judgments issued by the judge as well as the entire legislative and judicial system. Regardless of opinions about the modern judiciary, the message symbolized by the images of Themis is universally recognizable. One may ask to what extent ancient mythologies are related to the contemporary image of courts, legislation, and the judiciary. I would venture to say that we are dealing here with a situation that reflects expectations regarding the functioning of the entire justice system, rather than with knowledge of the mythological attributes of Themis. The widespread recognition of her image should be treated as a sign of social expectations of the judicial system, in which an important role is played by something called a sense of justice. This feeling seems to be a common social expectation, and, therefore, a universal expectation regardless of the place, time, and form in which it is articulated.

It is important to note the common application of the principle of cause and effect in mythological narratives. Every evil act affects the condition of the world and therefore the condition of all humanity. Evil acts always have consequences and the perpetrators of these acts are subject to punishment, regardless of whether they are detected and brought to justice in a human court. But, as is clear from myths about the fall of humanity, counteracting evil by punishing the detected perpetrators of evil deeds is not effective on the scale of humanity as a whole. Despite the response to specific evil done by individuals, evil leaves its mark on the world, one might say, on a cosmic scale. The punishment that befalls the perpetrator of an evil act is individual in nature, while all of humanity continues to suffer the consequences of the evil committed individually. Various cataclysms befall humanity: famine, loss of immortality, lack of the visible presence of the gods, diseases, earthquakes, floods, and every other imaginable misfortune.

Here one can point out a second problem by asking the question: What is punishment in mythology? Or to formulate this problem differently: Is the punishment socially just that befalls an individual who commits evil, since all of humanity suffers the consequences of his or her individual wrongdoing? It can be assumed that this punishment suffered by the mythological villain is primarily of a didactic nature. It sets an example of behaviour that is considered socially reprehensible for everyone and, at the same time, indicates the consequences that should be faced by anyone who breaks recognized social norms. However, there remains the problem of justifying why all of humanity should suffer the consequences of individual ill behaviour? The answer to this question should be sought in the social functions of mythology.

Here, it is worth drawing attention to Eliade's concept of the myth of eternal return, according to which all ritual actions, including the re-enactment of myths, in the form of a story or performance, in a way transport the participants of a given event to the exemplary situation of the beginning of the world, to a place and time beyond

everyday, secular reality.[32] In this sense, participation in the re-enactment of myths belongs to the order of the sacred, which is different from what constitutes the reality of everyday experience. Thus, Eliade claims, every person lives in a world that is in a particular way polluted by everyday life, although his or her thoughts and desires strive to return to paradisial happiness. Also, according to Eliade, this should be seen as a kind of sacralization of the idea of justice independent of the legal systems created by human beings.

What more can be said about the functions of punishment presented in myths? In Greek mythology, punishment is understood as an inevitable reaction to evil deeds. In this sense it is presented as something just, something that aims to restore the divine order. The situation is similar in Egyptian and Norse mythology, where the punishment for evildoers is the annihilation of the soul and deprivation of the possibility of eternal life. The Egyptian goddess Ma'at punishes those who have violated harmony and the principles of justice; her actions are intended to prevent the return of chaos that threatens the world as a result of the evil deeds committed by humans. The Norse gods Odin and Thor punish those who have broken moral principles and thus disturbed the world order. Norse mythology developed the concept of fate and destiny, according to which every individual evil deed is subject to inevitable punishment, but the sum of all evil deeds committed by humans and gods leads to the complete destruction of the world. In Hindu mythologies and in various variants of Buddhist mythologies, the punishment for evil deeds is the rebirth of the evildoer in forms of existence lower than humans in subsequent incarnations of the soul.

It is worth noting that in various mythologies the motif of punishment for ill behaviour applies equally to all beings and forms of existence, both gods and humans. Moreover, the punishment is independent of the wrongdoer's place in the social structure. Ernst Cassirer's valuable observation is that the content of myths is always dynamic: "it is a world of actions, a clash of forces and clashing powers,"[33] and so the world of myths is a world of values in constant conflict, which are not abstract in nature, but can always be identified as forces of good or forces of evil. The specific values defined as good in all myths are: order, tidiness, harmony, and justice; what can be identified as evil constitutes their negation. What is perceived as good and evil has a direct relationship with the functioning of both society as a whole and of individuals. The content of myths indicates a utopian principle concerning the whole of society: if everyone acted righteously, the gods would not send various cataclysms to humanity. However, the theme of human rebellion against the cosmic order (which equals the social order) that appears in myths is evidence of a conflict between individual values and the values expected by society. Myths can therefore be treated as a kind of algorithm for dealing with those who deviate from the recognized norms of conduct. Moreover, myths clearly indicate the justification for the system of punishments applied to such wrongdoers and the rewards provided for the righteous.

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[32] M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*…

[33] E. Cassirer, *Mit i religia* [in:] *idem*, *Esej o człowieku*…, p. 144.

Apart from the obvious, direct, and severe consequences resulting from social chaos and anarchy (the lack of principles for organizing social life), the fundamental source of evil expressed in myths is an uncertainty resulting from the lack of definable principles of cause and effect.[34] This uncertainty entails a time of unbearable loneliness and helplessness for a human being, from which the only way to escape is to seek stability that can be provided by the principles of cooperation with other people through subordination to existing norms. Hence, first the concept of divine law expressed, perpetuated, and controlled by myths, and later the concept of the social contract, meaning the institutionalization and formalization of law. However, in both cases there is a magical power of social consensus at work, indicating that the source of law is something that somehow precedes human decisions.

Even today, in common consciousness, there is an idea of justice independent of the institutions of the judicial system, an idea which, it seems, refers to a law that is earlier than the law made by people. This law can be described as mythical, natural, or divine law. A perfect illustration of the functioning of this law is a quotation from a cult comedy, when the main character of the film is bid goodbye by his mother with the words: "Court is court, but justice must be on our side!," after which he receives a grenade from her, which he puts in his pants pocket on his way to court. In folklore, one can find other traces of such thinking about law and justice in the form of curses and admonitions. For example, the phrases "You're a nuisance!," "It serves you right!," "That's what you'll get!," etc., are usually said when one is powerless to punish someone for acts that are contrary to applicable norms. In such situations we unconsciously appeal to the existence of some abstract justice that goes beyond the norms established by the existing system of legislation. This is, in my opinion, an intuitive reference to the same law (natural or divine) whose existence we are convinced of by myths, the content of which we have long since forgotten. Finally, one more minor note: curses and invectives appear in myths as a kind of weapon of powerless ordinary people against powerful rulers who, as judges, remain beyond the reach of the law they themselves have made and which they are supposed to obey. Casting a curse calling upon the gods to mete out justice that could not be expected by appealing to the justice of the courts is treated in mythologies as an extremely powerful weapon, one to which rulers did not remain indifferent.

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[34] Eliade writes in this context: "man defends himself against what has no significance, against nothingness […], he flees from the sphere of the profane." M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*…, p. 36.

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Summary

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Myth and Punishment

A review and comparison of myths of various peoples makes it possible to claim that mythologies create a kind of pattern of legal systems. Regardless of the various functions indicated by researchers into mythological systems, the analysis of the content of myths makes it possible to distinguish their functions: establishing law (in myths about the creation of the world) and

establishing the principles of justice (in so-called myths of the fall of humanity and myths of the end of the world). These mythologies contain clues about society's perception of punishment for those who do evil and about the reward system for those (the righteous) who are the guardians of the principles established at the creation of the world. Importantly, myths known from antiquity continue to function in various areas of contemporary popular culture, indicating the existence of a lasting sense of justice, independent of any changes in codified legal systems.

Keywords: myth, punishment, justice, end of the world.

Streszczenie

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Mit i kara

Przegląd i porównanie mitów różnych ludów pozwala stwierdzić, że mitologie tworzą swoiste wzorce systemów prawnych. Niezależnie od różnych ról przypisywanych systemom mitologicznym przez badaczy analiza treści mitów pozwala wyróżnić ich nastepujące funkcje: w niektórych mitach (dotyczących powstania świata) – w zakresie ustanawiania prawa, a w innych (mitach o upadku ludzkości i końcu świata) – w zakresie ustanawiania zasad sprawiedliwości. W mitologiach tych zawarte są wskazówki dotyczące społecznego postrzegania kary dla tych, którzy czynią zło, oraz systemu nagród dla tych („sprawiedliwych"), którzy od starożytności funkcjonują nadal w różnych działach współczesnej kultury popularnej, wskazując na istnienie trwałego poczucia sprawiedliwości, niezależnego od wszelkich zmian skodyfikowanych systemów prawnych.

Słowa kluczowe: mit, kara, sprawiedliwość, koniec świata.