MÄRCHEN, SAGE, LEGENDE: TOWARDS A CLARIFICATION OF SOME LITERARY TERMS USED BY OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARS

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The purpose of this article is (1) to study briefly the literary terms Märchen, Sage and Legende and to list the characteristics of the genre which each designates, (2) to survey broadly some English renderings and uses of the terms by Old Testament scholars, (3) to suggest a translation of the terms and (4) to give a descriptive definition of each. It is hoped thereby to point the way towards a clarification in one area of biblical scholarship.

MÄRCHEN¹

1. The Term and Characteristics of the Genre

Märchen, a diminutive from the Old High German and Middle High German mär meaning news, account, narrative, report, depreciated early in meaning and took on something of the sense of "invented", "not true"—a concocted tale, an untrue story. A reaction in the 19th century which had its origin in the Sturm und Drang movement, 1765-85, and received a further impetus from the French romantics, was carried through by the German romantics, the Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Andersen with their collections of Märchen. So the prestige of the Märchen was raised. Today the Märchen covers the popular or folktale (Volksmärchen) and the literary tale (Kunstmärchen). Both are "stories" or "tales" and neither is necessarily true or false.

¹ I have relied heavily on Max Lüthi for my presentation of Märchen. The main works of his that I have consulted are: "Familie und Natur im Märchen", in Volksüberlieferung (Fests. Kurt Ranke, Göttingen, 1968), pp. 181-95; Das Volksmärchen als Dichtung (Düsseldorf/Köln, 1975); "So leben sie noch heute" (Göttingen, 1976²); Märchen (Stuttgart, 1976³); Es war einmal ... (Göttingen, 1977⁴).
What are the characteristics of the *Märchen*? The world of the *Märchen* is the world of "the beyond" where the preternatural and the supernatural, in modern terms the "unreal", predominate; it is a world that does not know the limitations of space, time and causality; it transcends the limits of our experience of reality. The places are nameless, the characters are nameless, and there is little sense of time. It is the most natural thing in the *Märchen* for Merlins or fairy-godmothers to appear and for trees to talk; one is quite at ease when a fearful animal appears, and a wise old owl can offer good advice from his perch on the branches. Characters flit easily from place to place. The world of the unreal has become the normal. The distinction between "the beyond" and the "this side" has disappeared. The whole story is easy and free in its movement with a certain simplicity, lightness of touch and playfulness. The movement between reality and unreality causes no embarrassment. Such is the *Märchen*. Because it covers a very wide area and embraces related types of narrative in other languages many scholars, both folklorists and biblical scholars, writing in these languages have retained the German term.

The ordinary popular *Märchen* has usually been a long time in oral tradition and has been worked and reworked along the way. Hence it often appears with many modifications, e.g. the story of the Sleeping Beauty. It can acquire a written form at any stage. The literary *Märchen* (*Kunstmärchen*) has been created or given a fixed form by an individual writer, singer or reciter. Today it is written down; formerly it was learnt by heart.

2. *Märchen* and the Old Testament

Hans-Jürgen Hermisson sums up the state of the question with regard to *Märchen* and the Old Testament as follows: "The prevalent view of Old Testament exegesis is that the Old Testament has not preserved any *Märchen*, but rather an abundance of *Märchen* motifs which would point to a rich *Märchen* tradition in ancient Israel".² Jay A. Wilcoxen writes virtually the same.³ The current view as summarized by Hermisson is, of course, the view of Her-