

## Review of The Bible Among the Myths

**Book:** John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009)

The Bible claims to be a book that depicts historical events, all the way back to the beginning of time, or at least most Christians have always believed that from their reading of the Scriptures starting from the book of Genesis. Liberal “Christianity” since the 19<sup>th</sup> century has however cast doubt on the historicity of major events narrated both in the Old and the New Testaments, especially the first eleven chapters of Genesis 1. According to liberal scholarship, the first eleven chapters are “primeval history” which is made up of myths and legends no different from the various ancient myths and legends found among the pagan peoples of that time. The “Flood myth” in Genesis 6-9 for example is stated to be borrowed from the Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic. But if the events in the Bible are not truly history despite the fact that they claim to be history, can we trust the Bible at all?

John Oswalt, in his book *The Bible among the Myths*, attempted to answer this question. The book is split into two parts, the first part attempting to understand what “myth” is and why the Bible should not be considered myth, the second part arguing for why the Bible is actually true history. If we were to use the Neo-Orthodox terms *historie* and *geschichte*, true history will be both of them, while we reject the connotations that lie behind this false distinctions.

### **The Bible and Myth**

Is there “myth” in the Bible? That might depend on how “myth” is defined. Oswalt states that the word “myth” can be defined a couple of ways. Firstly, it can be defined etymologically as something that is false (p. 33). Along this line, Oswalt shows that some such definitions define veracity and falsity such that anything that is not “scientific” can be considered false, which is too broad a definition. Secondly, it can be defined sociological-theologically, and thus myth is considered to be a story without necessary correspondence to what is true, but which is believed by the mythmakers and their societies to be true (p. 36); a cultural relativist definition. Thirdly, “myth” can be defined literarily, which is to describe a particular way of writing. Oswalt however believes that the third class of definitions is too broad since there is vagueness concerning the relation between symbols and realities. Thus, he asks the question, “[D]o we create our symbols or do our symbols create us?” (p. 39), noting that “many uses of this definition do assume that mythic symbols have a tenuous relation to historical reality” (p. 39). Fourthly, “myth” can be defined phenomenologically, which describe “myths” as those that partake of the characteristics of “myths” (p. 40).

In looking through these definitions, Oswalt attempts to distinguish “myth” from other types of literature like history. In order for “myth” to be a useful word, it cannot mean everything, for a word symbolizing everything symbolizes nothing. Thus, “myth” must be

distinguished from terms like “history,” such that the question can be asked whether the Bible is or is not “myth.”

From the various definitions, Oswalt sums up “myth” as possessing the principle of “continuity,” which teaches that “the divine is materially as well as spiritually identical with the psycho-socio-physical universe that we know” (p. 43), otherwise known as pagan monism. Oswalt then describe what is essentially paganism as being the worldview from which the various myths have their being, and contrast that with the Bible’s teaching about God’s transcendence, as it concerns our understanding of God, man, creation, and ethics.

Oswalt acknowledges similarities between the ANE (Ancient Near-East) myths and the Bible. However, by defining “myth” as being one of content and orientation, the similarities between the ANE myths and the Bible are stated to be one of form but not one of substance. Thus, there are indeed many similarities in form between the Bible and ANE myths, but there is stark contrast in terms of their orientations.

Such an answer to the question concerning the Bible and myth is indeed helpful, for we should all be able to agree that the Bible’s orientation is starkly different from pagan ANE myths. That said, such a definition of “myth” seems to me to be a sleight of hand, for Oswalt diverts the question to one of content rather than one of genre. But what if there were to be found an ancient ANE document that utilizes the poetic forms of “myth” but teaches the transcendence of one Supreme Being? Would that be considered “myth” or “history”? It seems that such a document would qualify as “myth” using any other criteria, but would strangely be categorized as “history” based upon its content. In other words, it seems to me that Oswalt utilizes the fact that the Bible is *sui generis* concerning its message to “cheat” on the question of whether the Bible is “myth” or “history.” Thus, while I agree on the Bible’s uniqueness from all pagan thought, I do not think the question of whether the Bible is history or myth can be resolved using Oswalt’s definition of “myth.” The most that can be said is that the Bible is not a “pagan myth,” but can it be a “Jewish myth” or a “Christian myth”? I do not believe Oswalt’s approach will help us answer the question.

### **The Bible and History**

Perhaps what is more important for the question of the Bible’s veracity is whether the Bible is in fact true history. Oswalt argued for the position that the biblical message cannot be divorced from the veracity of the biblical accounts. As he argues concerning divine OT acts,

If God did indeed intervene in Israel’s life in order to reveal himself to the world, then the reports of the events and their interpretations must be as much revelation as the events themselves, or the whole attempt would be fruitless. (p. 141)

Oswalt also argued against the theories of liberals like Rudolf Bultmann, process theologians like Alfred North Whitehead, liberal biblical scholars like John Van Seters, Frank Cross, William Dever and Mark Smith (chapters 8-9). Against all these, Oswalt

argues that they could not explain the origins and nature of Old Testament religion and texts, and especially how the Israelites could espouse transcendence instead of the principle of continuity prevalent everyone else. Thus, through all these, Oswalt argues for the essential historicity of the entire Old Testament.

Again, Oswalt's defense of the Old Testament as history, and the importance that it is truly history, is very helpful. But that does not adequately solve the problem of historicity and our previous question on myth. Concerning historicity, what does "history" means concerning the events of, for example, the 6-day creation week? Borrowing Oswalt's method in his previous section, if "history" is to be defined too broadly, then it is of no use for us. Can it be said, according to Oswalt's current stance on historicity, that Genesis 1 is "historical," because it is a "true myth" that speaks concerning actual history, but that it is not history in the plain sense of a 6-24 day creation? So what is "myth" and what is "history"? After nearly 200 pages, I do not think that Oswalt has properly delivered on these questions he posed.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Oswalt's book is very helpful in showing how the Bible is indeed different from pagan ANE myths, and thus its message is unique. We can also be assured that liberals have failed to explain how the Bible's message can come into being through natural means, and be confident that the Old Testament's narratives are indeed history. But that is about as far as we go. For those who care about what actually happened in history and whether there is actual true correspondence of the Bible to real space-time historical fact, there is nothing much of substance on offer. So, is the Bible unique? Yes, it is. Is the Old Testament true history? You wouldn't know the answer from this book.