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BOOK REVIEW

John N. Oswalt. *The Bible among the Myths*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. 204 pp. Pbk. US\$17.99.

John Oswalt's recent book, *The Bible among the Myths*, sets out to debunk critical scholarship on the Old Testament that equates biblical literature with myth, or places it on the same level as other ancient Near Eastern literature. Oswalt points to a shift in the academic guild from the position that Israel's religion was unique, to the prevalent opinion that the Bible evolved from its ancient Near Eastern environment and contains little that could be construed as distinctive. Though taking aim at the scholarly literature, Oswalt's book rarely interacts with it in any detail in either the main text or footnotes. Thus the book appears to be aimed at a popular rather than a scholarly audience.

The tone of the book is very polemical as he labels adherents of the opposing position as "the enemy" (28). At times Oswalt characterizes those who disagree with him as "scholars who cannot admit the possibility of revelation" (13) and claims that those (unnamed) scholars who would deny his claims do so because "they do not want to admit that the Bible has a different origin than the myths" (63 n. 1). In fact, it appears that Oswalt is content to point to scholars' suspect motives to refute contrary positions rather than actually interacting with their arguments.

Part 1 (chs. 1–5) asserts that the unique worldview of the Old Testament (in combination with Greek thought) is the basis for "the way of looking at reality in the Western world" (21). Thus the characteristics of Western civilizations owe their existence to Hebrew thought, although Oswalt suggests that the loss of the Israelite contribution and the exalting of the Greek contribution resulted in Enlightenment follies, which turned such things as the validity of reason into "ultimate values" (28).

The book then surveys scholarly definitions of “myth” that have been offered in recent years. Oswalt rejects the majority of these definitions and instead offers his own: myth is a form of expression that articulates “continuities” among nature, humans, and the divine. Myth suggests that all things in the universe are “continuous” with each other, and myth exists to “actualize that continuity” (45). The worldview of continuity/myth holds that “all things that exist are part of each other” (48). Therefore, humans can affect the divine through performing rituals (sacrifices, cultic prostitution, etc.) as “all things that exist are physically and spiritually part of one another” (49). Myth asserts that everyone is divine, the world is divine, and no distinction can be made between physical realities and spiritual ones. Thus, Oswalt’s “myth” appears to be close to “pantheism.” Oswalt further asserts that this “continuity” thinking is the hallmark of *every* religion in the world, apart from those derived from the Old Testament (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Oswalt’s discussion of many pagan worldviews is quite insightful, though it would have been more effective (given the context of characterizing ancient Near Eastern myth) if he had provided some examples from these ancient Near Eastern myths that would demonstrate this worldview for the reader.

Oswalt’s defining of myth as the worldview of “continuity” is the key to his thinking on this matter as his thesis centers on the distinctiveness of the Bible’s perspective over against the worldview of its environment in the ancient Near East. However, this defining of myth as a particular worldview appears to be quite unlike how many biblical scholars would use the term. Most would say that a culture’s myth *reflects* a culture’s worldview, rather than *being* the worldview itself. However, by defining myth in this way Oswalt has no problem denying any equation of the Bible with myth, though readers of the scholarly literature may be unconvinced. In fact, even in instances where the chaos monster appears in the Old Testament (“Leviathan,” “Rahab,” etc.) Oswalt denies the use of the term myth since “the worldview of continuity” (94) is not present in these passages. However, although his survey of such instances purports to be

exhaustive he actually misses several references (Ps 89:9–12; Job 3:8; 9:13; 26:12) which would contradict some of his points.

After asserting that myth is “a particular way of looking at reality” (47) and delineating common features of myths, Oswalt then describes a biblical worldview, which he designates “transcendence.” Contrary to continuity thinking, transcendence holds that God is radically other than nature, and denies continuity between physical and spiritual planes. Transcendence underlies everything the Bible says about reality and accounts for the unique features of Old Testament literature (monotheism, iconoclasm, the value of humans, the reality of ethical demands, etc.). Clearly the worldview of the Bible is distinct from that of the rest of ancient Near Eastern literature.

The second part of the book (chs. 6–10) focuses on the debate over the historicity of the Old Testament. He begins by asserting that the Bible originated the very idea of history so that claims that the Bible is not historical are “something of an oxymoron” (112). He then proceeds to define “history,” surveying the definition in Webster’s dictionary and that of the late historian R. G. Collingwood from 1946. Unfortunately, Oswalt does not interact with the modern debate on history and historiography. Oswalt offers his own definition (largely based on Collingwood) of history, which asserts that for a text to be history it must: center on human activity in “time and space,” exist “for the purpose of human self-knowledge,” attempt “to be an accurate account,” and include “an attempt to evaluate” (113).

As with his definition of myth, Oswalt’s definition serves him well as he proceeds to survey the literature of the ancient Near East and deny the title of “history” to all that he finds. For example, although the date formulae from the reign of the Babylonian king Hammurabi records his ascendancy to the throne, his reign, and many of his actions in history (construction projects, military victories, etc.), since “there is no analysis or evaluation and no basis for a better understanding of humanity or the human condition” (119) it is not historical. Regarding epic accounts, Oswalt claims that “many scholars” (although none are named) believe that the heroes in epics “were historic individuals” (118) with “an original basis in fact” (119), but denies that epics are

historical because they “make the hero a representative figure” due to “the principle of continuity” (119).

This critique could be leveled against the Bible itself as it is possible to view Adam/the man as a representative figure in Genesis 2–3, since he is called “the human” (Hebrew, *ha-adam*). Later in the book, however, Oswalt argues for Abraham’s historicity because his adventures are not “those of Everyman” (125) in spite of the fact that some Abraham stories feature him as representative of Israel (like the nation of Israel, Abraham goes to sojourn in Egypt due to a famine, and while there God causes mighty plagues to afflict the Egyptians, allowing Abraham to leave Egypt with great spoil [Gen 12:14–20]).

In the end, Oswalt rightly denies the label “history” to these writings, and most scholars would agree that the literature of the ancient Near East is not history writing. Oswalt asserts that the lack of history writing in the ancient Near East is due to their embrace of the worldview of continuity: “since all things recur endlessly, there is no future different from the present, and there is no past from which the present differs” (122). The “continuity” worldview serves as a comprehensive explanation for all that contradicts the biblical approach even though later societies which embraced continuity did write actual history.

Oswalt then turns to survey the Old Testament approach to history. As with his discussion of myth, this section does not demonstrate awareness of the modern debate on historiography or deal with the main issues in this regard. Although he claims to have discussed “the nature of historiography” (138), Oswalt in fact never even mentions “historiography” in this discussion. Though apparently ignorant of or ignoring the extensive modern discussion on this issue, Oswalt actually takes time to critique Collingwood (cf. 138, 145), whose book was written in 1946.

Oswalt concludes that biblical literature is historical. It is objective, not biased to the powerful, and did not retell “a fictional recreation of the past” (137). Curiously, in his survey of the Old Testament, Oswalt leaves out Genesis 1–11. This omission is striking since the majority of those who would use the word “myth” in regard to the Bible would do so primarily in regard to these chapters. Another conspicuous omission in this

context is a discussion of Chronicles, which is usually seen as the example *par excellence* of “fictional recreation of the past.”

In the penultimate chapter, Oswalt reviews the work of John Van Seters, Frank Moore Cross, William Dever, and Mark Smith as representative examples of arguments opposed to his own. Most of Oswalt’s critiques here are cogent rejections of each of their positions. However, at times he draws unnecessary conclusions from the positions of these scholars. For example, he notes that Cross provides “a strictly human explanation for the distinctive view of reality that produced the distinctive Israelite literature” (176) and therefore rejects his work. However, historic Christianity has confessed that Scripture is both divine and human; a human explanation for the writing of a book need not contradict the divine inspiration behind it. Elsewhere he criticizes Cross’s theory because the process Cross posits would have been “unparalleled elsewhere in the ancient world” (176)—this is curious given that Oswalt is arguing for the origins of the Bible being an utterly unparalleled process of direct revelation.

Oswalt concludes his book (ch. 10) with a somewhat sermonic ending that explains how the downturn in morality in the West is due to the embrace of the worldview of “continuity” and an abandonment of biblical “transcendence.” Oswalt’s cultural critique highlights some helpful parallels between “mythological thinking” and that of popular thought today.

Oswalt’s work is a welcome addition to the debate over the character of the Bible in light of ancient Near Eastern evidence. He rightly asserts that the theological claims of the Bible cannot be removed from its historical claims—the historicity of biblical events is important. His description of the pagan worldview is insightful and his presentation of the biblical worldview and its clear distinctiveness is helpful. However, it is unfortunate that Oswalt is not more conversant with recent debates concerning history and fails to deal with many of the critical issues. Also, the clear polemical nature of the book will doubtless limit his contribution’s audience to those (mostly) already convinced.

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