

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A Book Summary of
The Bible Among the Myths

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OBST 510 B11
Old Testament Introduction

by

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Introduction

In the Introduction of *The Bible Among the Myths*, the author, Dr. John N. Oswalt, discusses that his thinking on the topic of the book began to be developed many years ago in the 1960's while he was attending seminary. He also points out that the scholarly thinking about the Old Testament (OT) as compared to other ancient Near Eastern (ANE) writings has also undergone a significant transformation since the 1940s. This change in thinking was lead primarily by William F. Albright, who noted that the way the ancient Israelites thought about the world around them and their God was radically different from other cultures in the ANE. Oswalt notes, however, that in more recent times, scholarly opinions have changed. Some modern scholars now believe that the Hebrew culture of the OT is not as unique as previously thought. Curiously, Oswalt says that there have been no new major discoveries that should cause scholars to rethink their positions. He posits that the change in thinking was done for theological or philosophical reasons. Oswalt suspects that the aftermath of wars in Europe, the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s in America, and rejection of traditional authority may have played a factor in this as well. This rejection of authority also leads to the rejection of the idea of revelation. In his second letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16)."¹ If modern scholars reject the idea of the Bible being revealed to man by God, then the OT is nothing more than a collection of stories of a nomadic, ANE tribe. Oswalt notes that while there are, in fact, many similarities between the OT and other ANE writings, it is the differences that are critical. He also insists for an honest and open look at the evidence that supports the Bible's claims.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

The Bible in Its World

In the first chapter, Oswalt notes that the Bible has played an important part in how Western culture views the world. He also writes about the contributions that Greek philosophy has made to the West. Early Greek philosophers shared several similar views with the Hebrews. They believed the universe was not a “polyverse” and that the world was a place of observable causes and effects. They also shared a belief in the law of non-contradiction. However, these views were in conflict with the prevailing Greek religious views. In Greek religion, there was a believe that causes and effects were unknowable and there was a rejection of the law of non-contradiction. Oswalt says that it was actually the world of myth that truly dominated Greek culture.

At the same time the Greeks were struggling with their cultural decisions, the Hebrews were undergoing a similar struggle. The invasions by both the Assyrians and Babylonians into Israel brought into sharp contrast the Hebrew worldview with the worldviews of two competing cultures. The conquering of Israel was a direct affront to the Hebrew God, and should have caused the unique faith of Israel to fade away. Interestingly, this did not happen. Oswalt notes that this was due to the fact that Israelite prophets predicted the fall of the nation as punishment from God. This gave further credence to the surviving Israelite texts that were discovered upon the people’s return to Jerusalem.

Oswalt closes the chapter noting that a biblical worldview is necessary, even in the twenty century. Science and logical must be grounded in a personal, transcendent Creator, otherwise relativism will prevail. He also concludes that current trends in the U.S. are the direct result of the loss of biblical beliefs in our culture.

The Bible and Myth: A Problem of Definition

In chapter 2, Oswalt asks the important question of whether or not the Bible does, in fact, have a unique view of reality. As noted in the Introduction, in the mid part of the 20th century most scholars would have affirmed that the Bible does have a unique view of reality and is not myth. However, there was a change in thinking at the latter part of the last century and into the 21st century. Oswalt describes what may be considered a very confused way of thinking, in which scholars affirmed that the Bible was unique, yet also affirmed that the historical record in the Bible was incorrect. This is what led to the change in thinking that the Bible was not unique in its organs, but was myth similar to other contemporary cultural writings.

Oswalt challenges these assumptions, and spends some time discussing the term “myth.” He notes that the biggest challenge is, in fact, the definition of the word myth, and he discusses the historical-philosophical definition and the phenomenological definition. The historical-philosophical definition of myth is further subdivided into etymological, sociological, and literary. The etymological definition speaks to the falsity of the thing discussed. Oswalt notes that the Bible cannot be classified as myth in the etymological sense, because the Bible attempts to speak about accurate, historical events. The sociological definition focuses on what is true. Oswalt says that this definition is not adequate because some religious beliefs do line up with reality while others do not. Yet we cannot accurately describe all of them as myth. The literary definition focuses on how stories are written. Finally, the phenomenological definitions speak to the commonalities, or characteristics, of literature that has been called “myth.”

Oswalt concludes the chapter by stating that the Bible is historical record of God’s interactions with humanity. Further, the Bible is unique and has a real purpose. Neither of these concepts is a characteristics of a myth.

Continuity: The Basis of Mythical Thinking

Oswalt opens chapter 3 with two important points. First, he reminds the reader that the Bible, such that it is, is not myth. Second, he introduces the concept of continuity. Continuity, Oswalt says, “is the idea that all things that exists are part of each other.”² This concept of continuity is one is that is characteristic of actual myths. The idea that creation or nature is the coexistent with humanity, humanity is coexistent with deity, and deity is coexistent with nature. The idea of continuity is expressed in many ancient myths where natural forces (wind, rain, fire, the sun, etc.) are represented by the gods; that creation or nature emanates from the gods; and that gods have many human attributes and failings. In exploring the origins of continuity, Oswalt suggests that the human desire for security drives a need to have a sense of order. This in turn drives humans to want to explain how the sometimes unexplainable happens. The gods cause natural occurrences such as storms, floods, drought, and famine. It is easier to explain an unknown natural event by attributing it to a god.

Oswalt notes some important common features found in myths, including polytheism, the use of images and idols, the eternity of chaotic matter, and the fact that myths present both a low view of the gods and of humanity. These are in stark contrast to the biblical view, which Oswalt discusses later. Another characteristic of myth is that there is no standard of moral and ethical views. In myth, there are multiple gods (e.g.: polytheism), thus moral standards are arbitrary and capricious, based on the whims of the gods.

Oswalt closes the chapter with a discussion about the myth incorporating a cyclical concept of existence, which although not specifically mentioned, is a key feature of the Hindu worldview and the karmic cycle of birth, death, and re-birth.

² John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 48.

Transcendence: Basis of Biblical Thinking

In discussing the basic of biblical thinking, Oswalt opens by noting that the Bible is not just moderately different from other worldviews in what it offers, it is radically different. The Bible offers a worldview that is completely unique, and not like any other religious or philosophical way of thinking. Even if one assumes that the OT documents are not as ancient as thought or if the historical statements are false, the Bible still offers a worldview that is completely different from other ANE systems of thought.

Oswalt describes several common aspects of biblical thought, some of which have been mentioned previously. Monotheism is the concept that there is only one God. Iconoclasm is “the insistence that God may not be represented in any created form.”³ This teaching comes from the Ten Commandments in both Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 5:8: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” The Bible also teaches that the first principle is God as a Spirit, which is contrary to other ANE beliefs that show matter as eternal and transcendent. Additionally, the concept of conflict in the creation process is absent from the OT. God simply brings the Universe into being through His will. There is no battling of the elements, conflict with other gods, or any struggle or conflict whatsoever.

It is important to understand is that the transcendent concepts in the Bible all point to God’s relationship with creation. The Bible shows that God is not part of the cosmos nor is He dependent on it. Rather God is separate and apart from the cosmos. He is the uncaused first cause, and a necessary being on whom all other beings rely for their existence. These ideas are absolutely antithetical to the cultures surrounding Israel in the ANE.

³ Oswalt, 65.

The Bible versus Myth

At the opening of Chapter 5, Oswalt reiterates the point that he has argued that the Bible is quite different from contemporary religious literature found both in the ancient Near East and the rest of the world. He does acknowledge that there are some similarities, however it is the differences that are most important. Most prominently, the issue of ethics is the biggest difference.

The ethics of non-biblical cultures, Oswalt says, consist of offenses against the gods and offenses against other human beings. An example of this can be found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where the hero Gilgamesh spurns the sexual advances of the goddess Ishtar and his friend Enkidu insults Ishtar by throwing the severed leg of the vanquished Bull of Heaven in her face. Conversely, ethical offenses against humans typically take the form of violations of various cultural law codes. Ultimately, how humans treat each other has no great significance. Oswalt reminds the reader that stories of this sort are typical of the mythical worldview.

The Bible, on the other hand, takes a completely different approach to ethical issues. There are cultural laws and codes found in the Bible. Similar to the Mesopotamian law codes, these are given by God. The significant difference is that God's people understood that they were under a covenant relationship with God. Their lives were not a reflection of causes in the heavenly realm, but rather they were a part of God's plan on earth.

In discussing the similarities between the Israelites and other ANE cultures, Oswalt notes there are similarities in practice, similarities in expression, and similarities in thought patterns. That being said, in examining the Genesis account, he points out that key elements of myth are missing. While Psalms uses figurative language similar to Canaanite literature to describe God, it doesn't actually say that God an element of nature. These are important differences.

The Bible and History: A Problem of Definition

Perhaps the key difference between the Bible and myth is that myths are based on the relationship between the gods and the material world, and the OT is completely void of these types of description of God. God is separate and apart from nature. He can control it, but His interactions with humanity are through miracles (or “unique, nonrepeatable events of time and space”⁴ as Oswalt calls them). As with the definition of myth, the definition of history is equally important in understanding that the Bible does, in fact, contain history.

In citing a standard definition of history, Oswalt notes that this definition shows that history actually functions on several different levels. History is about people and is a summary of events involving people. In writing history, it is also important that the writer has an accurate understanding of reality. Some of the key beliefs that form an accurate view of reality are that humans are free agents and not determined; that causes and effects are linked in the physical world, not the invisible world; that falsification of data is hostile to accurate and truthful understanding; and there is an objective, consistent standard by which actions and behavior can be judged.

Oswalt lists six examples of information found in ANE literature: omens, king lists, data formulae, epic (stories), royal annals, and chronicles. These are not actually history, and he concludes there are several reasons history was not found in ANE literature. In short, ANE writers were too preoccupied with day-to-day life to think about history. Safety and survival were foremost concerns. The Bible, on the other hand, has significant differences in how the writers thought about human beings, their failures and defeats, and relationships. History for the Israelites was about God’s actions in their lives.

⁴ Oswalt, 111.

Is the Bible Truly Historical? The Problem of History (1)

While Oswalt has shown in previous chapters that the biblical worldview provides a basis for genuine history, it is certainly obvious that it differs significantly from how modern history is written. This raises two questions: is the Bible actually an example of historical accounts, and does it matter whether or not this is the case.

Oswalt notes that some modern historians do not consider the Bible historical because it contains stories about God's divine involvement in human affairs (e.g.: miracles). One must ultimately ask the question, is the Bible reliable and historically accurate? If so, then there is no justification for discounting the miraculous. Some critics, such as Collingwood, conclude that because of stories of divine intervention, the Bible contains no historical writing. One may conclude this shows a preconceived naturalistic bias.

Biblical authors believed that in writing history, they were documenting God's actions in this world. They believed that this was of greatest importance. This concept is made most clear in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The incarnation, Oswalt states, is not a one-off event, but was rather the logical continuation of what has been happening since the beginning of the human race. If key events were, as the biblical writers believed, revelation from God, this necessitated that the events be written down as history. Their failure to do so would be contrarily to their beliefs.

In closing, Oswalt observes that while the historical accuracy of the Bible is of vital importance, the religious aspects of the Bible do not create the history. It is God's intervention in human events that is the basis for the religious inspiration. It is difficult to explain how the Israelites would embellish the historical events if there were no divine sources of the events in the first place. This, Oswalt says, is an extreme view.

Does It Matter Whether the Bible Is Historical? The Problem of History (2)

In this chapter, Oswalt brings many of the issues previously discussed into sharp contrast through asking a key question: Can the history of the Bible be separated from the faith of the Bible? He also asks if it really matters if the events of the Bible really did occur, were accurately reported, and correctly interpreted.

Critics have said that if we attach faith too closely to historic events and those events are found to be false, this calls into question our faith. Thus, it is better to separate faith from facts. Oswalt disagrees and says that the message of the Bible cannot be extracted from its historical context. The Bible, he says, is historical and we must examine it in its historical context. God's messages were spoken to humans. The messages of the OT prophets were given to people. Even the poetic and wisdom books were a reflection of Israel's life with God of their fathers. In short, Oswalt concludes that the faith of the Bible and the history of the Bible are inseparable. Scripture itself supports this idea. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says that "if Christ has not been raised...your faith has been in vain" (1 Cor 15:14, NRSV).

Despite what critics like Bultmann say, Oswalt contends that we cannot separate the theology of the Bible while simultaneously denying the historicity of the Bible. The two are inseparably linked. If the Bible cannot be trusted to be historically accurate, it cannot be trusted to be theologically accurate. Just as Paul tells us, the historical fact of the resurrection of Christ gives us confidence in the theological teachings of His resurrection: namely, through Christ we can have forgiveness of sins. Yet if the resurrection were not true, then the theological teaching that comes from the resurrection would not be true. Oswalt contends that Paul was simply expressing the established logic of the Bible in a clear and concise manner.

Origins of the Biblical Worldview: Alternatives

Oswalt opens the final chapter of his tome by reminding the reader of the changes in OT studies over the past fifty years. Despite there being no new data, many scholars have changed their presuppositions that the Bible is not unique and could not have been revealed from God. This, perhaps, may be due to the bias towards naturalistic thinking that is pervasive in scholarly circles. He goes on to say that before accepting these conclusions, we must explain why the biblical writers went to great lengths to create explanations for the world around them that are in contrast to other ANE writings. If the writers of the Bible claimed they received revelation from God, and we can find no other explanation for the differences of the Bible, then we should take their claims seriously. We should not rule out, *a priori*, the idea of revelation. If God is who He says He is, we should expect that He would reveal Himself to humanity through revelation and speaking directly to people.

In quite a bold move, Oswalt reviews the ideas of four scholars who he believes have representative ideas that disagree with his conclusion and who believe that the biblical explanation for its worldview is wrong. Van Seters, who believes that it was a late creative fiction that was the source of Israel's understanding of reality; Cross, who believes a pre-existing epic poem was the source of Israel's worldview; Dever, who believes that ancient biblical writers were elitist; and Smith, who believes western Semitic religions were the basis for Israel's understanding. Oswalt's critique of these four writers outlines his disagreement with their positions, and leaves the reader with ample evidence that the critics are leaving too many unanswered questions and may have hidden biases in their views. While he may not have fully dealt with all of the material available, Oswalt points out that the current scholarship has not presented convincing arguments to counter his conclusions about the origins of the Bible.

Conclusions

In concluding his work, Oswalt makes some very important observations. The biblical worldview is radically different from the rest of the ANE literature, and understanding biblical events is critical to understanding God. Other literature is clearly mythical in the way it portrays the world, yet the Bible is not. Ancient cultures were not, as some think, primitive or unscientific. Yet they were steeped in mythological beliefs. Oswalt says this may actual have been by choice.

Modern western thinking is beginning to lean heavily towards a naturalistic and materialistic worldview. But people continue to look for ways to understand and control the non-material world. This Oswalt, quoting Molnar, says often leads to pagan temptation and neopaganism. Materialism fails to bring any meaning or lasting satisfaction, and is a result of the failures of the Enlightenment period. The outworking of the Enlightenment Age showed us that science can only answer the “how” questions, but science has no capacity to answer the “why” questions. Oswalt paints a rather dismal picture of the logical outcomes of this kind of thinking. It leads to, among other things, loss of ethics, displacement of truth with power, the devaluation of the individual, and lack of responsibility for one’s own actions and behavior. Sadly, one can see many of these ideas manifesting themselves in modern American culture today.

The ancient Israelites had a worldview that was unique. The Creator was separate and apart from creation. God could not be manipulated through nature, magic, or the like, and His will was not bound to this world. God stood above His creation, yet He desired to have a personal relationship with individual human beings. This is what makes the Bible special. If one answers “yes” to the ultimate question of whether there is a God, does He have a plan for our individual lives, and has He revealed himself through the Bible, then one must take seriously the claim that the Bible is, in fact, the revealed word of God.