

## **Review of *The Bible Among The Myths* by John N. Oswalt**

**A review of *The Bible Among The Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature*, by John W. Oswalt, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.**

The author of this book is well known for his scholarly two volume Commentary on Isaiah in the Word series. This book is meant more for a more popular audience, but is valuable for scholars, pastors and the general reader. From the books published in the past year I would put this one near the top of the pile. What I think Oswalt succeeds in doing in *The Bible Among The Myths* is to show how unique the Christian-biblical creation worldview is from those other ancient creation stories it is often too superficially associated with. Moreover, it does this in a way that the thinking person can easily apply to the modern world.

According to his introduction Oswalt has written this book primarily because of the sea change that has happened over the status of Israelite religion in comparison with other Semitic religions. Whereas a generation ago scholars like W. F. Albright and G. E. Wright were pointing out the differences between the characteristics of Ancient Israelite versus other West Semitic religions, nowadays, chiefly under the influence of a naive positivistic minimalism in many University Religious Studies departments, the unique features of the OT view of reality are thought to be explicable “on the basis of evolutionary change.” (11).

The first thing the writer does is to sort out the various understandings of “myth.” The term is sometimes thoughtlessly bandied about by critical scholars without much precision. By “myth” are we to mean “legend” or “fictional account” and to thereby assume the Hebrew Bible to be essentially false like the minimalists do? Or does it describe a certain literary feature? No, says Oswalt, these kinds of definitions hardly define myth at all. What is needed is a more analytic approach which studies the characteristic features of myths and myth-makers (33-41). When this is done certain common themes surface which get behind the way the ancients looked at the world, and so, why they invented their myths. Once this is understood the vast conceptual differences between the Israelite worldview and that of its ancient neighbors begins to stand out in bold relief.

The author observes “Myth is interested in principles, forces, cycles, the immense, and the numinous. Particular and mundane events in time and space are specifically not of interest to the mythmaker. They do not tell us of the great recurring cycles, and furthermore, the telling of them might disturb those cycles.” (43). From this understanding Oswalt enters into perhaps the key theme in his book; the presence of the idea of “continuity” in the worldviews of all but the Judeo-Christian outlook and its heretical spin-offs. Oswalt defines “continuity” as:

Continuity is a philosophical principle that asserts that things are continuous with each other. Thus I am one with the tree, not merely symbolically or spiritually, but actually. The tree is me; I am the tree. The same is true of every other entity in the universe, including deity. This means that the divine is materially as well as spiritually identical with the psycho-socio-physical universe we know. (43).

To put it slightly differently, this is the old principle of “the continuity of being” which is found in Greek rationalism as well as Eastern pantheism: it is also found in various forms of Christian thought which has been unduly influenced by Greek philosophy especially (e.g. natural theology). Thus, “myth depends for its whole rationale on the idea that all things in the cosmos are continuous with each other. Furthermore, myth exists to actualize that continuity.” (45). It is from this understanding that Oswalt can display the glaring differences between the pagan and Christian views of the world: views which persist down to the present day. Chapter 3, “Continuity: The Basis of Mythical Thinking” is a short (15 pages) but impressive analysis of the fundamental aspects of continuity in religious thought. A close study of this chapter alone would stimulate a great deal of thought and would open the eyes of many a reader who has not been able to put their finger on the common elements in pagan world-pictures. This is then contrasted with the Biblical idea of transcendence in the next chapter, then the comparison is drawn out further in chapter 5, entitled “The Bible Versus Myth.” These three chapters are really outstanding. The author continually brings out the way Biblical monotheism has produced unique understandings in the conception of Deity (64, 71f.), the importance of being human (70), with the principle of Biblical transcendence (not philosophical transcendence) found in the Creator – creature distinction (to use Van Til’s term) underlying the whole (81); including the nature of ethics (89). My copy is filled with notations throughout these pages. This also completes Part One of the book.

Part Two addresses historical matters including, importantly, the notion of History itself. In fact, Oswalt sounds positively presuppositional at times; as when he states that,

It is the Bible’s insistence that there is one transcendent God, who is utterly consistent in character and purpose, apart from whom nothing else exists, that gives rise to the concepts that are essential to history writing. Furthermore, the Bible insists that Yahweh has made all this known through human-historical experience. (145-146).

This section is concluded by a chapter (chapter 9) which critiques several unbelieving liberal scholars like John Van Seters, William Dever and Mark Smith. Their theories about the origin of Israelite religion are shown to be elusive and unsatisfactory. A final chapter summarizes the findings in the book.

There are, of course, some few areas of disagreement, such as when the author in places seems to assume the independence of Greek thought and its positive effect on Christianity, but there is not much to quibble about. *The Bible Among The Myths* is an outstanding contribution to Biblical Studies and sound Apologetics. I shall be using it as a required text for my TELOS course on “Biblical Worldview.”