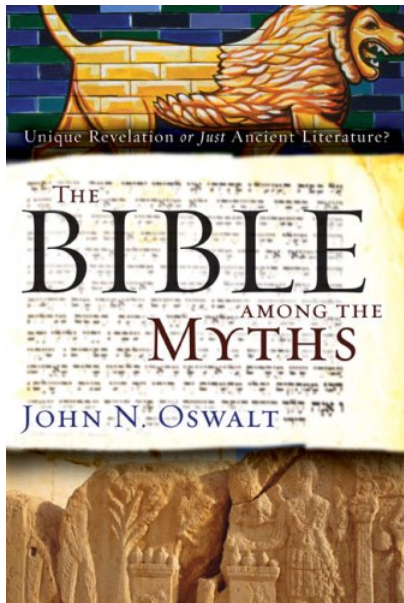


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Oswalt, John

The Bible among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?

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Claude F. Mariottini
Northern Baptist Seminary
Lombard, Illinois

Evangelicals affirm that the Bible is a unique book because it is the result of divine revelation and not merely the work of human authors. However, the discovery of several religious writings from other ancient Near Eastern cultures has led many biblical scholars to deny the claim that the Bible is the result of divine revelation. The issue Oswalt addresses in his book is whether the Bible is a unique revelation from God or just another literary product among the religious literature of the ancient Near East.

Oswalt believes that the way Israel conceived and thought about its God and the way other cultures in the ancient Near East thought about their gods was so different that scholarly views that Israel adapted their religious ideas from the religions of their neighbors could not explain this difference. Was Israelite religion another religion comparable to other religions in the West Semitic world, or was the religion of the Bible unique because God revealed himself in the historical events narrated in the Bible?

Many people today do not accept the idea that the Bible, although written by human beings, is the product of divine revelation. Oswalt reminds his readers that, a generation or two ago, most scholars would take seriously the fact that the Bible was the work of divine revelation. He cites the fact that in 1950, when Karl Barth was at the peak of his

productivity, scholars were willing to accept the view that the world was not self-explanatory and that some form of divine revelation was necessary to explain it. Today, the idea that this world is not self-explanatory and that revelation from beyond is necessary to understand it is profoundly distasteful to many biblical scholars.

Oswalt contends that, although the biblical material available to scholars fifty ago has not changed, the way of interpreting the biblical material has changed drastically. As an example, Oswalt says that, when comparing the similarities and differences between the literature of Israel and the literature of the ancient Near East, scholars who do not admit the possibility of revelation insist that the differences that were so clear and unmistakable to scholars in the past now emphasize that it is the similarities that are vital to show that the religion of Israel is no different from the religions of the surrounding nations.

In his attempt at evaluating whether the religion of Israel was essentially similar or essentially different from the religions of its neighbors, Oswalt focuses his study on two areas: myth and history. The book begins with an introduction in which Oswalt presents the argument for the book. The book then is divided into two major sections. The first section deals with the Bible and myth, the second with the Bible and history. Oswalt's goal is to ascertain whether the religion of Israel is based on the myths of the ancient Near East or whether the writers of the Old Testament were attempting to describe the revelation of God in the unique events and experiences that occurred in time and space.

Oswalt believes that, when myth is defined properly, the religion of the Bible cannot be classified as myth because the authors of the Bible rejected the mythical ideas that were prevalent in their world. Oswalt said that myth devalues the individual, diminishes the importance of history, promotes magic and the occult, and denies individual responsibility. In myth, the way people knew their gods was through nature. In Israel, nature played only a secondary role in the religious experience of the people. Instead of nature, the way Israel knew God was through a unique human-historical experience.

Oswalt says that the theological teachings of the Bible are based on the veracity of its historical claims. However, much skepticism exists today about the historicity of biblical events. One reason for this skepticism is that many scholars doubt that these events ever happened. Oswalt asks: "Can we believe in the God of Scripture if the medium through which he is presented to us is demonstrably false?" (15). According to Oswalt, the God of truth cannot be revealed through false narratives.

Oswalt recognizes that there are similarities between the religious literature of the Bible and the religious literature of the other nations in the ancient Near East. He emphasizes that the similarities that exist between the Bible and other religious texts are superficial,

not essential. The similarities that exist between the Bible and the religious literature of the ancient Near East do not suggest a common way of thinking. Although the biblical writers used similar language, literary forms, and even common beliefs of the world in which they lived, these similarities should not be the controlling factors in the evaluation of Israelite religion, since the biblical writers intended to present a vision of reality that was diametrically opposite to the world of myth that undergirded the religions of the ancient Near East. What makes the Bible a unique book among the other religious writings of the past is its unique worldview. The unique worldview of the Bible was not borrowed from its neighbors. This worldview was derived from Israel's unique understanding of how God entered their history and chose them to be a special people with a divine mission in the world.

The Bible shows that the religion of Israel was different from the religion of the other nations of the ancient Near East. Myth dominated the religions and cultures of the ancient world. The religion of Israel offers another view of reality. Thus, to describe the Bible as the world's greatest myth is to misinterpret the view of the world the Bible presents. Past generations of biblical scholars believed that the Bible does not share the characteristics of myth, but that is not true today. Today many scholars are convinced that the religion of Israel is the product of myth and that biblical interpretation requires a study of comparative myth.

Oswalt contends that scholars have broadened the definition of myth to include the biblical text. According to many scholars, myth is a story about the gods, a story that did not happen in time and space. This definition of myth includes the words of the gods and fictitious narratives describing actions and events that never happened. Thus, Oswalt says that to call the Bible myth under this definition means that the Bible is rooted in falsehoods. Myth can also be defined as a story of the gods in which natural events are interpreted supernaturally. This definition of myth is based on a prescientific worldview that precludes divine causation.

According to Oswalt, what these different definitions of myth have in common is the idea of continuity (43). The religions of the ancient Near East believed that continuity existed between the human, the natural, and the divine. Myth was expressed and actualized in cultic rituals. This view of myth ascribes human personality to natural forces. People believed that the retelling or the reenactment of a story secured a desired effect for the benefit of the worshiper. The concept of continuity was found in all religions of the ancient Near East, except in Israel. The concept of continuity also means that the Bible cannot be classified as myth because religions based on myth use natural symbols to speak of the gods, while the Bible uses historical events to speak of God's relationship with Israel.

While the religions of the ancient Near East were based on the concept of continuity, the basis for biblical thinking was transcendence. The Bible rejects the view of continuity and affirms that God is radically different from his creation. This view of transcendence explains why Israel adopted a monotheistic religion, while all other religions adopted a belief in many gods. This view of transcendence explains why Israel was not allowed to make an image of God, since an image would suggest that God could be part of the created order and that he could be manipulated through ritual acts. This view of transcendence is also the reason sexuality did not play a role in the worship of Yahweh. Transcendence makes it impossible for the worshiper to manipulate God or nature through rituals and magic.

Another major difference between the religions of the Ancient Near East and the religion of the Bible is that those religions were based on the interrelationship between the gods in primordial time. The Bible, on the other hand, describes God's interaction with the people of Israel in the arena of history. Oswalt's view of history is based on the definition developed by R. G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946). Using Collingwood's definition of history, Oswalt says that history is a systematic effort at discovering what human beings have done in the past and that the interpretation of what happened in the past is for the purpose of human self-knowledge (112).

According to Oswalt, most documents and religious texts that have survived from the ancient Near East reflect an effort to keep order and maintain security. On the other hand, the Bible's unique emphasis is on human experience in history. In the Bible, people are introduced as real individuals whose lives are rooted in history. While other nations used myth to express their faith, the faith of Israel was based on what God had done in history. Biblical history is not identical to modern definitions of history. Biblical history reflects divine causation and is related to God's purpose for the world. Modern history is based on the view that people are responsible for what happens. Biblical history is based on the fact that God entered human history. The narratives of the Bible that describe this divine intervention is what makes biblical writing unique.

Oswalt says that what makes the religion of Israel different from the other religions in the ancient Near East is Israel's claims to have received their knowledge of God through their redemption from Egypt. What makes the Bible a unique book is that this revelation of God in the history of Israel demands careful recording of what God has done and said. As Oswalt writes: "If God is not history and yet is revealed through history as divinely interpreted, it was of the greatest importance to record accurately what happened and to report as precisely as possible what God said about the meaning of what happened" (149).

Oswalt's conclusion is that the Bible is different from other religious documents in the ancient Near East: "It is now a revelation of God to us because not only are the actions and messages recorded by divine inspiration, but so also are the interpretations, and the transmission of this material has been divinely superintended so that the resulting Word is fully capable of being used by the Holy Spirit to produce the same affect and effect in us as did the original acts and words" (194).

Oswalt's book was written to affirm the uniqueness of the Bible. Those who believe that the Bible is the literary product of divine revelation will agree that Oswalt has shown that the Bible is different from the other religious writings from the ancient Near East. Those who reject the notion that God has revealed himself in the history of Israel will remain unpersuaded that the Bible is a unique book containing divine revelation and that the religion of Israel is different from the other religions in the ancient Near East.