

The bible among the myths summary

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Introduction The author, John N. Oswalt, was first introduced to the subject of this book in his seminary studies in the 1960s. Oswalt introduces his book with a narrative of the similarities and differences that exist between the Old Testament and the literature of the Ancient Near East.

Prior to the 1960s scholars believed that the Old Testament was unique and did not resemble the literature of the surrounding cultures, but now there has been a shift in thought. Many scholars believe today that the Old Testament is virtually identical to Ancient Near East writings. This issue of differences and similarities will provide the focal point around which the book revolves.

1 Oswalt introduces the reader to the definition of myth and acknowledges that scholars differ on the precise definition but that the essence of a myth is its characteristics. His claim is that he will attempt to show that if a myth is defined by its characteristics and functions, then the Bible does not fit that definition. 2 Oswalt points out that once a culture adopts the typical belief of the myth (the world is all there is) certain characteristics will be attributed to that culture.

Among these are the lack of value of the individual, no interest in history, the practice of magic and the refusal to accept responsibility for one's actions. The debate that the Bible is only "history-like" will be the second part of the book. Oswalt informs us that we will look into the characteristics of the biblical historical narrative and compare it with the Ancient Near Eastern approaches and show that the Bible is of a different category altogether.

3 Oswalt closes the introduction his argument that the Bible will not allow us to disassociate history from theology. His claim is that to trust the theology one must trust the history. His wish is that his readers will give attention to the evidence supporting the Bible's claims that it was revealed. Oswalt, John, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 14. 2 Ibid., 14. 3 Ibid., 15. 1

Chapter One

The Bible In Its World

The different thoughts that contribute to how the Western world views reality are Oswalt's introduction to his book. The dominant worldview thought was the "polyverse" in which human existence is the result of conflict between many different outside forces. The Greek philosophers believed in the "universe" in which there must be a single unifying principle in the cosmos.

The final thought was the monotheistic, one God view of the Hebrews. The unifying principle thought of the Greeks from the seventh to the third centuries BC brought about the belief in a real world of cause and effect. At the foundation of this thought was the absence of contradiction. This philosophy brought the Greeks into conflict with the "polyverse" culture and it was never able to exercise a dominant hold on the Greek culture.

The Hebrew people were unique in their worldview. They believe that there is only one God and that God is the sole Creator of everything. The Hebrews believe that God exists apart from the creation and that God reveals himself to people in the context of their unique experiences in space and time.

God communicates his will to the world and rewards and punishes on the basis of obedience to that will. ¹ At the beginning of the Christian era, the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus into the Greco-Roman world created a combination of the Greek and Hebrew worldviews. The Greeks now had an explanation for their “ universe” and the Hebrews now had “ cause and effect” logic that they tended to overlook. Oswalt concludes that the undergirding of a transcendent God allowed science and logic to become fully developed.

Oswalt, John, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature*. (Grand Rapids:

Zondervan, 2009), 23.

Chapter Two

The Bible and Myth: A Problem of Definition

The second chapter attempts to find a definition for the concept of myth. Oswalt starts his definition process by discussing the debate of whether the Bible has a distinctive view of reality. Until fifty years ago most scholars believed that biblical literature did not share the characteristics of myth. Today there has been a radical shift in opinions, such as the possibility that mythical thought and mythical literature are at the very heart of Israel’s religion.

¹ Oswalt believes that this change is based on assumptions and not on new discoveries. The problem of definition encompasses the first obstacle when defining a myth. The validity of a definition must be evaluated. The first problem is that a definition must be broad enough to include all the items

that share common characteristics but narrow enough to exclude items that only have a few common characteristics.

The second problem has to do with the nature of the definition and whether it provides a description or an evaluation. Oswalt groups definitions of myth according to their type as either historical-philosophical or phenomenological. He then subdivides historical-philosophical into etymological, sociological and literary. Etymological definitions of myth emphasize the falsity of what is being described and are frequently too broad. In sociological definitions of myth, truth is seen as relative.

Perception of something being true makes it true. Oswalt labels his final subdivision of historical-philosophical definitions as the literary definition. Symbolism is employed to express the narrative of the myth. Not only do all three types of historical-philosophical definitions have critical evaluation of the item being described but they also add to the concern of having too much breadth. They have the possibility to include items that may have only one feature in common. Oswalt concludes that

Oswalt, John, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 30-31.