

REVIEWS

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

There is no lack of books that argue that the Bible is no different from any other ancient mythology. From one perspective, there seems to be logic to such a theory. The Bible shares with ancient myths a belief in divine beings, miracles and heroes performing fantastic deeds. Perhaps the only difference is that the “biblical myth” continues to have believers today.

John Oswalt deals with these questions in his book: *The Bible Among the Myths*. It would be tempting to tackle this issue by simply comparing biblical stories with mythological stories. However, Oswalt takes a more useful route by looking at the different worldviews found within the Bible and ancient myths. Building from this foundation, Oswalt provides a persuasive argument that the Bible is fundamentally different than ancient myths.

Oswalt does a good job of taking a look at the very nature of mythology. He investigates etymological, literary and phenomenological definitions of myth in an attempt to have the best understanding of the nature of myths. After looking at these definitions, Oswalt concludes that the common link between all myths is the concept of continuity. By continuity, Oswalt means that all things are continuous with each other. This link explains how the ancients attempted to manipulate their gods. A worshipper may enter into sexual intercourse or some other activity to try and receive the assistance of a fertility god, since what is done on earth is continuous with what takes place in the heavenly world of the gods. Further investigation of ancient myths provides additional common characteristics including: polytheism, images, eternity of chaotic matter, personality not essential to reality, low view of the gods, conflict as the source of life, low view of humanity, no single standard of ethics, and a cyclical concept of existence. With a solid foundation of the true nature of myths, Oswalt then prepares the reader for the way in which the Bible differs.

Just as continuity is the foundation of all mythological thinking, Oswalt finds an underlying principle for the biblical worldview in the concept of transcendence. Central to biblical thinking is that God is other than his creation. This belief shapes all that is found in biblical narratives. Oswalt also finds a number of

common characteristics of the biblical worldview that are diametrically opposed to the mythic worldview, including: monotheism, iconoclasm, first principle as spirit, absence of conflict in the creation process, high view of humanity, reliability of God, God as supra-sexual, sex being desacralized, prohibition of magic, ethical obedience as a religious response and the importance of human-historical activity. By contrasting these concepts with those found among myths, Oswalt demonstrates that the Bible is indeed fundamentally different from mythology.

The second part of Oswalt's book deals with the issue of history. What does one really mean when they claim that the Bible is either historical or unhistorical? To investigate this, Oswalt looks at the different ways that ancient non-biblical texts recorded information, including: omens, king lists, date formulae, epics, royal annals and chronicles. Oswalt argues that ancient history writing was handicapped by its worldview of continuity. If all things are continuous, it is impossible to take seriously an individual person or event. On the other hand, the biblical view of God's transcendence provides a better environment for history writing as all events can be examined separately and individually. Unlike the myths, who may use a historical setting as a context for a moral message, the Bible presents itself as book where one personal God acts in history, using real historical people and makes himself known in real historical events. Oswalt is very well aware that not everyone agrees with his view of faith and history. Oswalt does take a look at other attempts to redefine the role of history by Rudolf Bultmann and Alfred North Whitehead, examining their positions and providing helpful critiques.

This book is a very helpful resource for biblical scholars. Although Oswalt is an Old Testament scholar and uses that knowledge in this study, Oswalt takes his investigation beyond the limits of Old Testament study. Oswalt does include the New Testament, myth scholarship and philosophy of history in his research. Oswalt is also open about his own bias as an evangelical Christian. This is not a weakness as every author has a bias, Oswalt is simply more honest. Oswalt does seem to make an attempt to not just repeat evangelical beliefs and he carefully interacts with opposing viewpoints. Oswalt does not take the position that the Bible is true because it says it is but rather by research into mythology and history, is able to argue persuasively that the Bible does not belong to the genre of mythology.

It is difficult to find any weaknesses in Oswalt's work. However, at one point Oswalt acknowledges the difficulties of numbers in the Old Testament and the challenges archaeology has presented for Old Testament historicity. Unfortunately, Oswalt does not provide the reader with any help in understanding these problems in the context of a historical Bible. He simply acknowledges that these problems exist but continues to assert the historicity of the Bible. Despite this one disappointment, *The Bible Among the Myths* is a very useful resource. It is very readable and helpful for the interested layperson and still has enough content to be valuable for scholars. John Oswalt has provided a very important work both for Old Testament studies in particular and Christian studies in general.

Stephen J. Bedard

Swinburne, Richard, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 373pp. Pbk. US\$49.95.

Richard Swinburne offers what may be his tour de force in "Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy". It is one of those rare books which forces one to think about and analyze every argument it contains. The work addresses claims of divine revelation.

The book starts off with a section on "Meaning" which analyzes terminology, presupposition, analogy and metaphor, and genre. He argues that presuppositions are not contained in the message conveyed in spoken or written word. He writes, "In order to separate statement from presupposition, we must ask, whatever the speaker's actual beliefs, are there any common beliefs of the culture presupposed in the utterance which can be siphoned off, leaving what the culture would naturally suppose to be its message intact?" (p. 30). This "siphoning" of meaning is necessary because "[a]lthough speakers may use declarative sentences for many different purposes... the paradigm job of such sentences is to convey information, to add to the hearer's stock of beliefs" (p. 29). Swinburne offers an example: suppose a Roman historian wrote that "The divine Augustus traveled to Brindisi." This sentence is not intended to convey the information that Augustus is divine. That Augustus is divine is *presupposed* by the author of the sentence. Rather,

the sentence is intended to tell the reader that Augustus traveled to Brindisi (p. 29).

The next part of the book argues for four possible tests to determine whether a divine revelation has occurred. These tests are 1) whether the content is the “kind of thing which God would have chosen to reveal to humans” 2) “whether the method of expression is one to be expected of God, 3) whether “the church has developed the original revelation in a way which plausibly brings out what was involved in it ...”, and 4) “whether the interpretations provide the sort of teaching which God would have chosen to give to humans” (pp. 107-108). He argues convincingly for each of these tests applying to the Christian Revelation. Thus, this section will be useful to the Christian apologist who wishes to demonstrate that Christianity interacts with the divine.

The third part of “Revelation” examines the Christian Revelation specifically. Swinburne argues that Jesus and His message were the “original revelation” provided to believers (pp. 145ff). This “original revelation” contained the teachings of Jesus, which Swinburne divides into five parts. These teachings are that Jesus is divine (pp. 145ff), that His death is a sacrifice for sin (pp. 150ff), His founding of the Church (pp. 151ff), that God loves His people and His people should “forgive each other and show unlimited love to each other” (pp. 154ff), and that the world would come to an end, at which point God would judge the world (pp. 156ff). These teachings are essential to Christianity, and Swinburne’s discussions are valuable. It is in his interpretations of the meanings of the Church and the Bible, however, wherein Swinburne forwards his most controversial claims.

Swinburne argues that the Church has a central place alongside Scripture in Christianity. The creedal statements central to Christian faith may not have been derived had it not been for the Church (pp. 189ff). Further, the Church acts as a method for assessing “rival interpretations” of various Scriptural truths (p. 200). It is undeniable that Swinburne advocates the Church as a high authority—perhaps even on a higher level than Scripture, for he argues that many conflicting interpretations of Scripture can receive almost equal footing on Scripture alone, so the Church is required to determine which of these should be approved. Swinburne’s view of the Church is one of the most important things in *Revelation* for the Christian to read and digest, regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees. This is because one’s view of the authority of a church

body is vastly important with regards to how one views other doctrines. As Swinburne writes, “Which doctrines are to count as central Christian doctrines... depend[s] very much on which ecclesial bodies we judge to be part of the Church. The wider our Church, the fewer such doctrines there will be” (p. 214). If one takes only the Roman Catholic Church, for example, as a valid ecclesial body, then one’s net of central Christian doctrines can include everything sanctioned by the Roman Catholics. But let us say they take the Orthodox, Roman, and Lutheran churches as authoritative. Then only those doctrines on which all these bodies agree can be regarded as central, or essential to, true faith, for if one church contains a doctrine which the others do not, it cannot be regarded as absolutely essential if the other churches are still legitimate. If it were essential and the other bodies disagreed, then those other bodies would not be legitimate, by the criterion of not agreeing on an essential Christian doctrine.

The Bible is the final major topic Swinburne addresses in “Revelation.” What do genre, presuppositions, etc. tell us about the meaning and interpretation of Scripture? Swinburne argues that we must take Scripture as being entirely true, but he qualifies this claim by arguing we must also realize what Scripture is—a collection of books written with divine approval but by human hands. Thus, he argues, we should take great care to realize the difference between presupposition and message, history and allegory, etc. While I do not agree with Swinburne on every point, I find his insights particularly interesting. He notes that “[t]he falsity of the presuppositions does not, therefore... affect the truth-value of a sentence which uses them” (p. 244). This kind of argument can be of direct worth to the apologist. For example, Swinburne utilizes Genesis 8:2 (“The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained” ESV) as an example: “The sky has no windows out of which the rain comes, but the quoted sentence is just the author’s way of saying, within the presuppositions of his culture, that the rain ceased” (pp. 244-245). This is a different approach apologetically than the one this reviewer would tend to favor, which would argue that the word “window” is used here in a metaphorical or analogous way.

Swinburne’s high view of the church is necessary alongside his view of Scripture. Swinburne writes that “The slogan of Protestant confessions, ‘the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself’, is quite hopeless” (p. 255). For it is

the Church which determines acceptable interpretations of Scripture. He writes that “Scripture belongs to the Church” (p. 256). Reading and interpreting Scripture requires a guide. This guide “...is the Church’s theological definitions and other central teaching, its tradition of the proper way to interpret the Bible, and its tradition of how particular passages should be interpreted” (p. 256). Regardless of whether readers agree with Swinburne here, he raises valuable points of discussion.

Revelation is undoubtedly a work that is vital for the Christian philosopher of religion. The issues Swinburne addresses are necessary to the Christian faith and the answers he gives, while sometimes controversial, are thought-provoking. The ideas are complex enough that the work should be considered readable only for those with some background in philosophy, but for those Christians who have such a background, *Revelation* is essential reading.

J.W. Wartick

Berlinski, David. *The Devil's Delusion. Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions*. (Basic Books: New York, 2009) 256 pp. Pbk. US\$15.95.

Into a very crowded genre of books redressing Richard Dawkins and the new breed of militant atheists comes an interesting and thought provoking submission by David Berlinski. With intellectual depth, helpful insight and more than a little sarcastic humour, Berlinski crafts a very readable and helpful book intended for those who feel that there is something seriously amiss in the recent best-selling category of anti-religious literature. “While science has nothing of value to say on the great and aching questions of life, death, love, and meaning, what the religious traditions of mankind have said forms a coherent body of thought. The yearnings of the human soul are not in vain. There is a system of belief adequate to the complexity of experience. There is recompense for suffering. A principle beyond selfishness is at work in the cosmos. All will be well. I do not know whether any of this is true. I am certain that the scientific community does not know that it is false.” (p. xvi)

Berlinski is a self-described 'secular Jew' who does not approach the questions of religion and faith as a believer, but rather,

as a member of the scientific community who cannot stomach the poorly developed and intellectually indefensible arguments of so-called “scientific atheists.” This might come as a surprise to the reader since the title of the book suggests a conservative religious perspective. *The Devil's Delusion* avoids grounding itself in any particular religious tradition choosing instead to advocate Intelligent Design from the perspective of science and philosophy.

The Devil's Delusion offers a stimulating and compelling journey through the major questions raised by scientific atheists. Berlinski fearlessly and, at times, ruthlessly tears into the arguments presented by writers such as Daniel Dennett, Victor Stenger, Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. The overall tone of his writing is one of incredulity – as if Tom Sawyer has tricked everyone into white washing the fence and no one has the slightest clue about how they've been deceived. Not everyone will appreciate Berlinski's tone as it is sometimes very harsh and vitriolic but anyone who has ever been upset by those who have openly attacked belief in God will undoubtedly find his counter punches entertaining and, at times, amusing. “Christopher Hitchens is prepared to denounce the Vatican for the ease with which it diplomatically accommodated Hitler, but about Hitler, the Holocaust, or the Nazis themselves he has nothing to say.” (p. 27)

It is with a marked economy of expression that Berlinski writes. At times, it leaves one wondering if the point he is making has been adequately grasped. At other times, one is astounded by the speed with which he is able to drive home his point. “Astronomical observations continue to demonstrate,” Victor Stenger affirms, “that the earth is no more significant than a single grain of sand on a vast beach.” What astronomical observations may, in fact, have demonstrated is that the earth is no more *numerous* than a single grain of sand on a vast beach. *Significance* is, of course, otherwise.” (p. 8)

What one quickly realizes about Berlinski is that he is a man of depth and breadth. He has taught both philosophy and mathematics in university but he is able to navigate these and other fields of knowledge with great dexterity and ability. As an example, in Chapter 4 he shows an intimate familiarity with Thomas Aquinas' cosmological argument which is immediately followed by a summary of the key people and events which led to the development of the big bang cosmology. Berlinski is able to move effortlessly between a staggeringly diverse body of knowledge.

Atheistic attacks often rest on the popularly held belief that science is trustworthy since it is founded on the bare facts of observable phenomena while religious thought is based on human ideas and wishes that are completely lacking in evidentiary proof. *The Devil's Delusion* deftly exposes the fallacy of this reasoning demonstrating that many contemporary theories such as the Multiverse and String Theory are highly speculative and lack any observable evidence. In fact, many contemporary theories in vogue today *cannot* be observed. Why then is Intelligent Design frequently dismissed by the scientific establishment because its central argument, the Designer, is not observable? Berlinski argues passionately that many scientific theories are based on extrapolation from observable phenomena to an unobservable cause. In this way, Intelligent Design represents a legitimate scientific perspective as a growing body of research will attest.

Berlinski's philosophical critique of the scientific atheist's central argument – that science displaces God as an explanation for the universe – is as elegant as it is brief. The foundation of scientific enquiry is to explain the physical world empirically without appealing to supernatural causes. But it is logically incongruous to conclude that there is no supernatural cause if this is also one's original assumption. The starting point and conclusion cannot be the same.

If there is one criticism of the book it would be that there are no references when quotations are presented leaving the reader to trust the accuracy of the writer's recollection. While this does not deal a death blow to the relevance of the work, it does impose a great limitation should a reader wish to pick up a theme or author in more detail. For those who prefer something more academic with a careful building of one's argument without so much rhetoric, this book may well disappoint. Still, for those who are willing to engage Berlinski in his quest to embarrass the academics who should know better than to speak into disciplines for which they lack any knowledge or education, *The Devil's Delusion* presents a highly entertaining romp through religion, science, mathematics and reason.

Jonathan Mills

Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 718 pp. Pbk. US\$40.00.

There are no lack of books on the resurrection of Jesus. Pastors, scholars, apologists and critics have all weighed in on the issue. It is fair to ask: After N.T. Wright's massive *Resurrection of the Son of God*, is there anything left to say on the matter? Michael Licona suggests there is and his newest book (based on his Ph.D. dissertation) demonstrates that he is correct.

The impetus for this book is the observation that there seems to be a great divide between current historical methodology and attempts to write biblical history. Most biblical scholars have no training in the area of philosophy of history. Licona asks the question: What would happen if one came to the resurrection of Jesus purely through the lens of standard historiographical methods rather than the type of historiography that has developed within the biblical guild?

In the first chapter, Licona familiarizes the reader with the approaches of historians outside the community of biblical scholars. Licona explains that in general, historians have moved beyond postmodern attempts to do history. There is an important need for the historian to manage their horizon, that is the set of presuppositions they bring to the subject. Complete neutrality is impossible, but the historian must seek to be as unbiased as possible. Finally, historians compare competing versions of the past and choose the version that is the best explanation of the evidence according to how they fulfill a number of criteria.

The second chapter tackles the difficult issue of how one speaks historically of what Christians consider a miraculous event. Licona examines the objections offered by David Hume, C.B. McCullagh, John Meier, Bart Ehrman, A.J.M. Wedderburn and James D.G. Dunn. Licona responds to each and explains that professional historians are expressing a new openness to examine miraculous events historically. The resurrection of Jesus is a valid event to investigate historically.

In the third chapter, Licona identifies the sources that he will use in his historiographical investigation. He examines each possible text and ranks them according to their usefulness. Licona concludes that the letters of Paul are the best historical sources for examining the resurrection.

In the fourth chapter, Licona mines his sources for the basic facts concerning the fate of Jesus. What emerges from the study is that 1) Jesus was crucified, 2) shortly thereafter, the disciples experienced something that led them to believe that Jesus had been raised, and 3) a few years later Paul converted based on what he thought was an experience with the risen Jesus. Although not included in what Licona calls the historical bedrock, he also examines the conversion of Jesus' skeptical brother James.

In the fifth chapter, Licona pulls it all together by examining a number of representative theories that attempt to deal with these facts. Licona investigates the proposals of Geza Vermes, Michael Goulder, Gerd Lüdemann, John Dominic Crossan and Pieter Craffert. Each theory is graded based on their explanatory scope, explanatory power, plausibility, ad hoc nature, and the potential to illuminate other historical events. While some are better than others, none of these theories pass all of the tests. Only the actual resurrection of Jesus from dead meets all five criteria and therefore is the best historical explanation for the evidence.

Licona's work is a valuable addition to historical Jesus research in general and the investigation into the resurrection in particular. However, there are a couple of concerns. In his examination of investigating miracles, Licona a number of times uses the illustration that his son can do with his help what the son cannot do on his own. In the same way, what would seem impossible for the historical Jesus to do on his own is completely possible with the intervention of God. That is a helpful illustration for settings such as Christian sermons or devotions but is perhaps less than useful in a historical investigation that seeks to be taken seriously by skeptics. It leaves the Christian with the option of leaning on God's omnipotence every time one encounters a historical difficulty.

The other problem is with Licona's decision to rely on the letters of Paul and to avoid reliance on the Gospels. Licona relies on Paul because there is greater scholarly consensus on the date, authorship and genre of Paul's letters than there is for the Gospels. At the same time, the anonymous nature of the Gospels, their slightly later date and more flexible genre should not disqualify them as historical sources (Licona does not ignore the Gospels, but makes clear his focus is on Paul). In addition, it could be argued that aside from 1 Corinthians 15, the Gospels have a more direct connection to the eyewitness experiences of those who saw Jesus after his resurrection. While, very likely that Paul saw the risen Jesus at his

conversion, there still is debate as to the nature of it as either a post-ascension physical appearance or as a vision from heaven (Licona argues well for an actual resurrection appearance).

Despite these concerns, *The Resurrection of Jesus* is an important book. For too long, scholarly disciplines have been isolated from each other. Licona's use of professional historical methods to the resurrection of Jesus is a breath of fresh air. Licona's examinations of competing theories is where he is at his best. Instead of misrepresenting critical theories in order to destroy a 'straw man', Licona confronts the theories head-on, not afraid to mention their strengths. Licona is respectful toward these theories and the scholars behind them, but he does not back down in keeping them accountable to historical method. This book is a book that is long overdue. Licona, himself points out areas on where the conversation can move forward and where to build on his work. This is an essential book for anyone, Christian or skeptic, who is interested in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Stephen J. Bedard

Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 591 pp. Hdbk. US\$29.99.

Eric Metaxas is a versatile author, working on such projects as books on Wilberforce and Veggie Tales cartoons. This time, Metaxas turns his attention to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This is an important figure to write on as he is both well and little known. Many Christians are familiar with the name, may have heard of the phrase 'cheap grace' and are vaguely aware that Bonhoeffer participated in some assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. Beyond that, Bonhoeffer is mostly a mystery to the average reader.

Metaxas takes the reader on a journey through Bonhoeffer's life. Beginning with his family, Metaxas paints a picture of Bonhoeffer's childhood. Much space is given to setting up the intellectual and cultural context to Bonhoeffer, while at the same time revealing the circumstances that would allow the Nazis to come to power. Bonhoeffer was early recognized as a brilliant student. He excelled at his theological studies and learned from some of the

greatest German scholars. Bonhoeffer studied under Adolf von Harnack and, while disagreeing with his liberal theology, was able to take his commitment to detail and apply it to his own studies. Metaxas also provides information concerning Bonhoeffer's relationship with Karl Barth and the impact of his theology.

As Hitler rose to power, there was increasing challenges for the church. Anti-semitism gradually increased, leading ultimately to the holocaust. The so-called 'German Christians,' those who gave in to the Nazi agenda, attempted to remove all Jewish influence and imagery from Christianity. Their attempts led to something that could no longer be recognized as Christianity. Responding to this, Bonhoeffer and others worked toward creating a confessing church, one that took biblical theology seriously. As Nazi violence increased, Bonhoeffer was sent to safety in America to teach at Union Seminary in New York. While still on the journey to America, Bonhoeffer realized that this was a mistake. Bonhoeffer soon returned to Germany and began some illegal seminaries to teach confessing pastors. As the situation deteriorated, it became apparent that things would not get better as long as Hitler was in power. Bonhoeffer was already connected with Germans open to assassinating Hitler and he eventually joined the plot. When the attempt failed, all those involved were imprisoned. While we do not have any of Bonhoeffer's writings from his last days, we do have accounts from other participants. Bonhoeffer went to his death with courage and confidence in eternal life.

What use does this book have in the area of apologetics? First of all, it is still claimed by skeptics that Hitler was a Christian and that the holocaust is an example of the evils of religion. Metaxas does a good job of demonstrating Hitler's contempt for Christianity and his willingness to use it temporarily for his own purposes. More importantly, Metaxas portrays Bonhoeffer as an apologist, even though he does not use that term. Bonhoeffer was a brilliant theologian who was willing to question the liberal assumptions of contemporary German scholarship. Bonhoeffer worked to keep orthodox theology centre, eventually leading to the creation of the confessing church. Even within the confessing church, Bonhoeffer was continually challenging them to remain loyal to biblical teachings.

The situation today is both different and similar to Bonhoeffer's. We do not experience the severe persecution under regimes such as the Nazis. However, there is continual pressure to compromise and to give in to trends and cultural changes. While the

result of remaining loyal to the Gospel are not likely to lead to time in a concentration camp, there is much we can learn from Bonhoeffer. We need to continually deepen our biblical and theological understanding, learning from the best in scholarship. It is from a keen mind and a passionate love for God that the church can respond to internal and external challenges. Bonhoeffer was able to see the best in other traditions (even having a great desire learn from Gandhi) and was willing to question his own traditions. All of this was based on what the Bible taught, testing all to the teachings of Jesus.

Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy is a well written and compelling book. If the reader is willing, it can be an inspiration to become a better scholar, pastor, Christian and even apologist. There is an opportunity to learn from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to share the passion for God's Word and the faithfulness of the Christian Church. Those familiar with Bonhoeffer's writings will appreciate the greater context in which they were written. This book is highly recommended for all Christians for both challenge and encouragement.

Stephen J. Bedard