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Walsh, Richard G.

Mapping Myths of Biblical Interpretation

Playing the Text 4

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The powerful role myth, as sacred story, has played/plays in the interpretation of the Bible is the subject of this monograph. Walsh takes the critical study of myth and applies this not just to the task of interpreting the myths of the Bible but to the process of biblical interpretation itself. To accomplish this, Walsh first investigates the multiple meanings of "myth" and then offers "maps" for his readers to navigate the varying scholarly uses of myth, the myths of the Bible, and, finally, the myths that inform "the search for, or defense of, the one true interpretation" of the Bible.

Walsh's approach to myth is basically post-modern. He views myths, sacred stories, not as "inspired revelation" but as "social contracts," structuring devices by which a community or person lives at any one time. As such, myth is always about power and control. Using Proteus, the shape-shifting ancient deity, as a metaphor to express the notion that divine power exceeds human control, he suggests that religion seeks to bind the "wildness" of the divine, particularly through its myths. The thesis of his book is thus expressed: "The prototypical hermeneutical binding is the conceit of the one true meaning of the [biblical] text. Such authoritative acts merely exchange the interpreter (whether individual or communal) for the text and the interpreter's ideological certainty for divine playfulness" (p. 18).

In his first chapter Walsh discusses a definition of myth but not before noting that any defining itself is an act of binding, including and excluding. He discusses various definitions of myth as well as the prevailing understanding of the concept in different time periods. Rather than present a single definition of myth, Walsh proposes three "shapes" or understandings, that is: the popular which equates myth with fiction; the romantic which sees myth as a communal work of the imagination; and the sociological which views myths as comprised of the various charter stories of cultures. He discusses the different understandings that give rise to each shape, what each focuses on and excludes, as well as the insights that each provides.

Chapter Two consists of Walsh's application of his three-fold taxonomy to an analysis of the use of myth in various scholarly disciplines. He investigates literary criticism, science, religion, philosophy, sociology, and psychology, demonstrating that "Commitments to scholarly methods and subjects are, then, yet another reason for differing understandings of myth" (p. 54). His critical conclusion is that scholars are blind to their activities of self-definition and empowerment as they work with myth. He likens these scholars to "ruthless tailors" who fit the use of myth to their disciplines, hence the title of his chapter, "Procrustean Mythographers." In regard to scholars of religion, Walsh holds that their "blindness often become willful obfuscation" (p. 87, n. 21).

In "Mything the Bible," his third chapter, Walsh contends that biblical scholars have, for the most part, accepted the popular understanding of myth as fiction and have, therefore, excluded myth from their discussions in order to defend "biblical truth." Some, however, accept the sociological or romantic notions of myth. Walsh finds that David Strauss understands myth sociologically, but does so to protect his own theological perspective. Rudolf Bultmann and other historical critics replace revealed truth versus myth with history versus myth. Amos Wilder employs a romantic understanding of myth and views the biblical text as an artistic, imaginative literary form. Burton Mack utilizes a sociological understanding of myth as social charter and demonstrates the mythic quality of the gospels. In so doing, Walsh contends, Mack has substituted the "myth and ethos of the liberal academy for that of the traditional church" (p. 119). Finally, Walsh discusses postmodern scholars Herbert Schneidau and John Dominic Crossan who offer a critique of the myths in biblical interpretation while at the same time masking the myths out of which they themselves operate.

The mythic character of biblical interpretation itself is the subject of Walsh's last chapter and he correctly points out that each person approaches this interpretation from within some temporary, limited human situation. For him certainty of any kind is a myth (fiction); the most one can hope for is consciousness of one's own myth. Hence, Walsh advocates an ethic of diversity, an acknowledgment that one lives inevitably amidst diverse interpretations and "truth is the pragmatic fit of an interpretation with its chosen or situated world" (p. 140). While he concedes that such a notion is itself a myth, he holds that captivity to a myth as diversity is somehow "hardly as alarming as captivity to a "myth seen as truth. Walsh also advocates an ethic of heresy by which one stands ready to critique one's own myth, adapt it, or adopt a new myth if that is judged to more adequately fit one's life situation. Nonetheless, for Walsh, the place of the Bible remains that of "a powerful demythologizing force to challenge subsequent mythic worlds" (p. 163).

In his final Conclusion, Walsh admits that he is "myth-ing" as he discusses myth. To this reader his myth takes a postmodern "shape" that sees pluralism as the only model for truth; this is evident throughout Walsh's work. His myth also involves a social charter in that he concludes his book with the thought that "the best we may do in our mythic inferno is to live generously and supportively" (p. 174).

One might suggest that the concept "interpretation" is, to use Walsh's metaphor, "Protean." If by interpretation of a biblical text one is speaking of the relevance of that

text in a particular 21st century situation, Walsh's work offers much food for critical reflection and argues persuasively for careful discernment. On the other hand, if interpretation speaks of the meaning of a biblical text to its original audience/author, then the approach of this monograph is less useful. I do believe that historical criticism, using as many of its methods as are relevant, can approach the "original meaning"/interpretation of a biblical text. Judaism and Christianity are, after all, historical religions, based on the histories of peoples. Walsh's work, however, should caution biblical scholars to investigate their own "mythic" assumptions as they pursue such endeavors.