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Slaying the dragon: mythmaking in the biblical tradition

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Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in The Biblical Tradition

Bernard F. Batto

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992
232 pp.

Today, there are many books available on the subject of myth. However, unlike many of them Batto's book, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in The Biblical Tradition*, is based on solid research. Batto's use of primary sources, his strong background in the Ugaritic and Akkadian languages, his sensitivity to the dating and historical development of texts, and his use of archaeological evidence qualify this book to be taken seriously.

Batto defines myth as "a narrative (story) concerning the fundamental symbols that are constitutive of or paradigmatic for human existence" (11). He admits that traditionally both Jews and Christians have viewed history as the chief medium of revelation, and myth to be its antithesis (1). Myths have been viewed as primitive and pagan falsehoods based on ignorance and superstition and things which are not in any way connected to the holy and divinely inspired word of God. Batto's book challenges this view.

Batto's thesis is that myth was one of the "chief mediums by which biblical writers did their theologizing" (1) and hence a medium of revelation (153). These writers borrowed myths from their Near Eastern neighbours and extended them to reflect their own theology and view of God. His book serves as a case study of this type of methodology, known as mythopoeism, as found in the primeval and exodus stories and the prophetic literature.

Batto grounds his thesis in the Documentary Hypothesis which proposes that the pentateuch is composed of four literary traditions—the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly traditions (J, E, D, and P respectively). In spite of the current academic attacks on this hypothesis, Batto uses it because of its value in a broad sense in explaining the development of the pentateuch. However, following Frank Cross's modifications to the theory, Batto suggests that the Priestly writer never contributed a literary strand to the pentateuch as such, but incorporated his own material into the two already existing strands (J and E), reworking them while still preserving them. This modified Documentary Hypothesis is an essential foundation to Batto's thesis as it allows him to date the J texts as older than the P texts and thus trace the development or transformation of the myths used in each.

Batto suggests that the Yahwist used the Babylonian myths of *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh* to present his view of Yahweh as the sovereign God and creator of the universe. Like the *Atrahasis* myth the Yahwist myth attempts to show that this world was created by a loving if somewhat floundering God, who learning from his mistakes was eventually able to clearly define the boundaries between God and humanity. For the Yahwist, as for the author of *Gilgamesh*, immortality was one of these distinctions between the divine and humanity.

According to Batto the Priestly writer used the Babylonian combat myth of *Enuma elish* to advance his theology of monotheism. The Priestly writer reworks the story of creation by replacing the floundering God of the Yahwist with a perfect one. Thus the view of the fall replaces the Yahwist's view of God slowly coming to terms with his flawed creations. The Priestly writer uses the combat myth as the foundation for his account of Israel's captivity in Egypt and their crossing of the Red Sea. Both are seen as having cosmic significance. Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh as depicted in the dividing of the Red Sea was actually a reworking of the primeval myth of Yahweh's victory over the water of chaos as evident in both the creation and the flood stories.

Batto's book is presented in a clear fashion. He keeps his reader informed of both the content and the development of his argument by presenting the data from which his conclusions are drawn and by summarizing these conclusions at the end of each chapter, building on them as the book develops. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the development of ancient Israelite religion in general, and to those who are interested in the primeval and exodus stories in particular. This book contributes to our understanding of these stories and helps to place them within the context of the ancient Near East.

The main disappointment is the absence of any discussion on the implications for both the believer and the scholar of viewing myth as a medium of revelation. For those who view history and myth as antithetical and for those who have little background knowledge of the Babylonian myths used in the analysis, Batto's conclusions may be disturbing and perhaps even offensive.

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Josephus and the New Testament

Steve Mason

Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992

248 pp. U.S. \$9.95

The New Testament has been the object of intensive scrutiny for centuries. The drive to understand the fundamental text of Christianity has meant that nearly every angle has been tried, nearly every scrap of evidence pressed into service. It seems strange, then, that arguably the most important extra-biblical writer for understanding the NT has never until now had a book for general readers relating his work to the NT itself. The writer is the first century Jewish historian Josephus; the book is *Josephus and the New Testament*, and it was worth the wait.