

Can Myths Be True and Meaningful?

Yesterday I received this interesting comment on my most recent post. It embodies a view that a lot of other members of the Blog have, and so I thought I should respond to it. It is about whether there can be meaningful myths in the Bible. Here is what the reader says.

Imaginative stories by definition are false. To say something is myth and by extension imaginative, is asserting that it is false. For us to say something is a myth, we have to be sure that it is entirely false. Or is it not the case?

I addressed a similar issue in the conclusion of my most recent book Jesus Before the Gospels. There I take a different stance on whether non-historical accounts (which would include myths) can be meaningful to us or not, whether they can be "true" in any sense. Here is what I say there (with respect more to the NT than the OT, but the same reasoning applies).

Like most authors, I get a lot of email from people who have read my books. One of the comments I repeatedly receive is that if there is something in the Gospels that is not historical, then it cannot be true (in any respect), and if it is not true, then it is not worth reading. I myself do not agree with this view.

It is true that to do the work of the historian requires one to be extremely critical about the sources of information available from, and about, the past. Some readers seem to think this approach to sources is taken only by atheistic,

hard-headed, liberal historians with anti-supernaturalist biases who are out to destroy religion. But in fact, it is the approach all historians take to all of their materials. The reason some readers find this approach to the Gospels objectionable is that they simply aren't accustomed to dealing with the Bible as history.

But even though I do deal with the Bible as a historian, I do not personally think that is the only way to deal with the Bible, and I find it unsettling when readers think that once the Gospels are shown to have discrepancies, implausibilities, and historical mistakes, we should just get rid of them and move on to other things.

I do understand that Christianity is widely seen as a "historical" religion, and that if there are historical problems with Christianity, then Christianity has problems. I understand that very well indeed. But ...

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