

Is the whole Christian story a myth? It probably depends on what you mean by myth.

For a very long time now, scholars of religion have had hard and protracted debates on what the term “myth” means, or should mean. I won’t be going into any of that here. Instead I’ll begin by talking about two teaching experiences, one negative and one positive.

Negative experience: my first teaching job was at Rutgers University, where I was asked to fill in for a professor of New Testament who had to take an emergency leave of absence in the middle of the spring term in 1984. Her husband had been diagnosed with cancer, he was dying, and she could not continue teaching after giving the midterm exam. Would I be willing to take over her class for the second half of the semester?

Absolutely I was willing. And I did so. It was really hard. I had to pick up wherever she left off. Among other things, she was using a textbook that I did not like at *all* (written by the great New Testament scholar at the University of Chicago, Norman Perrin). Among other things I did not like how he used the term “myth.” I don’t remember now (I’m abroad and don’t have access to any of my books) if he actually defined the term for his undergraduate readers: I suppose he did. But he used the term to mean something like “a narrative that conveys a fundamental religious truth, independently of whether it happened or not.”

OK, fair enough. But he used the term to talk about things like “the myth of Jesus crucifixion and resurrection.” My students were not as a rule devout conservative Christians (this was New Jersey! We’re not talkin’ Bible Belt here...). But still it was jarring to them. And to me. I knew what he meant: the accounts of Jesus’ death are principally concerned to convey the deep theological significance of the event. Still, calling them “myths” was off-putting, given the typical connotations associated with the word.

With that definition, though, certainly the Christmas story would also qualify as a “myth.”

Positive experience: these days, at UNC (where most of my students *are* conservative evangelicals!), I teach about how scholars have studied the Gospels over the centuries, and I make a particular point of talking to them about David Friedrich Strauss, whose 1835 book Das Leben Jesus (“The Life of Jesus”) turned New Testament research on its ear. Strauss argued that the Gospels are not historical accounts interested in showing what actually happened in Jesus’ life. Many of the stories of the Gospels are not historical in any sense. They actually didn’t happen. But they aren’t intending to convey what happened. They are intended to teach truths about Jesus. That kind of story – an account that is intending to convey a true idea, but that itself never happened, is for Strauss a “myth.”

In other words, for him, a “myth” is a true story that didn’t happen. My students have a very hard time understanding how something could be true if it didn’t happen, but in no small measure that’s because even though many/most of them are committed evangelicals, and know it, they are also even more, and more deeply, children of the Enlightenment, and do not know it. For them something can’t be true unless it happened. Until I explain to them and show them that in fact they really don’t think that, since there are all sorts of things all of us agree are “true” that are not events that happened in history.

I don’t agree with almost any of the details of Strauss’s very long book on Jesus, but on this basic point, I agree. The Gospels are full of stories that did not happen but that are attempting to convey truths about who, in the authors’ views, Jesus really was.

Still, I have always hesitated to use the term “myth” for this kind of story, simply because it

conveys precisely the wrong connotation.

Oddly enough, coming into this Christmas season I have found myself more open and accepting of the term. I think maybe it's because as I get older and as I do more and more research into the views, beliefs, and narratives of ancient peoples (Romans, Greeks, Jews, Christians) I see more and more and more stories that people told that encapsulated for them religious/theological "truths," even though no one today would give a moment's credence to such stories. We have no trouble calling such wild accounts myths. Should we be reluctant to call them myths if they are in the Bible?

I'm not proposing that we do call them that. I'm saying that I'm finding myself increasingly open to calling them that in my own head. In this season, I'm thinking of the stories of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke. As a critical scholar of the Bible with very serious historical interests, I have no trouble at all saying with heart-felt assurance and emphasis that these stories did not happen. I don't believe Jesus was born of a woman who had never had sex, or that he was born in Bethlehem. I don't think there was a world-wide census for which Joseph had to return to Bethlehem to register under Caesar Augustus. I don't think any of it happened: "No room in the inn," the worship of the shepherds, the coming of the wisemen, the slaughter of the innocents.

But I can see how these stories seem "common sense" to Christians and provide meaning for them as they reflect on the season and its importance. These stories provide a kind of framework for them, not just in the weeks and days and hours leading up to the morning of December 25, but for their entire way of looking at God and his relationship with humans.

That would be probably what most people would call "myths" if such stories occurred in some religion other than their own. And it's what people in non-Christians would call "myths" when looking at these stories in the Christian religion. I guess I'm increasingly aligning with that view.

Even so, I have to say that I absolutely adore these stories. They are simultaneously so simple and so deep, so matter-of-fact and so unbelievably full of meaning. As is this season. Even for me as one who personally stands outside the Christian tradition. Or do I? I suppose I'll always be inside it. It's in my DNA. I completely resonate with it. I relate to it. In my own secular way I embrace it. I'll say more about that in my next post.

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