1-1-1996

Review of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, What is Scripture: A Comparative Approach

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The governing metaphorical homology in ancient Near Eastern creation myths compares the human body to the earth: "the human body is related analogically to the earth, as a microcosm is related to a macrocosm" (p. 75). A matrix (fig. 6, p. 75) presents in tabular form relevant correspondences. Order, boundaries, differentiation in the homunculus are represented metaphorically from the external perspective in creation accounts; threats to each are personified in conflict myths. From the internal perspective, semen corresponds to seed in creation accounts, to water or moisture in personifications; gestation and birth are metaphorically represented as shaping and pinching off clay.

This heuristic model guides S.'s investigation of creation in the Bible (chaps. 3-5). Creation, he argues, paradigmatically represents the human condition and its redemption under metaphors of the birth process, agriculture, and conflict (chap. 3). The interface of the historical and natural is biblically represented as theophany and covenant. Theophanies and covenants are located in sacred spaces, perceived "horizontally" as sacred land, "vertically" as the sacred mountain centered around the axis mundi, alternately Sinai and Zion (chap. 4). A sustained contrast of the Yahwistic and Priestly accounts of creation completes S.'s examination of biblical protology (chap. 5).

In chap. 6 S. examines eschatology, principally as it is found in the prophetic corpus. The mythic pattern underlying biblical eschatology involves catastrophe and new creation. The readings of prophetic passages that S. offers here seem routine. The conclusions and the ten-page epilogue will be of particular interest to readers who wish to relate biblical mythology to biblical theology, or who wish to undertake the more difficult task of establishing the relevance of biblical doctrines to contemporary ecological crises.

This is a theory-building work. Although the book is written for the advanced undergraduate student as well as the graduate student and specialist reader, it conveys deep insight. It is timely, and it expresses concerns also voiced by theologians like James Barr, comparativist historians of religion like David Kinsley, anthropologists like Roy A. Rappaport, and others at the conjunction of religious and ecological concerns.

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Wilfred Cantwell Smith, What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach

Professor Smith's self-appointed task is that of thinking about the meaning of "scripture" in human experience and history, not only Jewish or Christian history. The work is challenging not only because of the size of the task or the complexity of the subject matter but also because it is quite simply an immensely difficult work. One must be prepared to read and reread sentences like this one: "Any scripture—Gita,
Bible, a Buddhist Sutra, or whatever—and any verse or term within it, means what it in fact means, and has meant, to those for whom it has been meaningful” (p. 89). This paradoxical statement nevertheless contains one of S.'s central ideas.

Already in the first chapter, S. establishes his view that scripture is a social phenomenon and therefore must be thought of only in relation to the communities that make it meaningful. Such an approach sounds very similar to the philosophical assumptions behind, for example, B. Childs's project of “canon criticism” (a similarity that S. himself takes note of), but it was equally an important element in H. Gunkel's form-critical attempt to locate texts in a Sitz im Leben. It is unfortunate that S. does not appear to see his project in relation to biblical scholars' own philosophical and theological agenda, but that may be the unique contribution that biblical scholars bring to S.'s call to dialogue.

In chap. 2 we begin to understand S.'s approach to his work. S. seems distressed with a profound loss of passion in the reading and appreciation of religious texts, particularly when modern views are compared with the views of the medieval Jewish exegete Rashi, the Cistercian Bernard, or even the barroom singing of "Song of Songs." In the case of Bernard, his famous "passions" included killing Muslims, and one might be excused for doubting the sagacity of choosing this particular Christian to illustrate a "passion for scripture."

In chap. 3, S. traces the historical roots of the idea of a scripture in Semitic cultures. S. suggests that the basis of scripture as a phenomenon in Judaism, Christianity, the Manichaean movements, and Islam, may well be the twin events of (a) the revolution of literacy sparked by the adoption of the alphabet as the basis for writing, and (b) Josiah's deuteronomic reform, which was a conscious religious movement based on a "text." These are interesting suggestions, but it is of the nature of S.'s work that such views are difficult to challenge.

In the chapters that follow, S. tries to illustrate his opening arguments with discussions of the role and meaning of texts and scripture in Islam (chap. 4), Hinduism (chap. 6), and Buddhism (chap. 7), and finally he compares the Chinese and the Western uses of texts (chap. 8). As someone whose training has not included Asian religious textual studies, I found these comparative chapters interesting, since S. certainly does accomplish his task of seeing how these textual traditions differ from the Semitic-Western paradigm that he otherwise works with, but I am certainly not able to offer critical assessment of the validity of his arguments.

The chapter on Judaism (chap. 5), however, may draw stern reactions from Jewish scholars who might suggest that S. does not adequately address the relation of text and ethics, the text in relation to behavior (like legal literature considered more broadly) rather than as a literary phenomenon in itself. Surely such an emphasis on ethics would take S.'s discussion of "the Bible's" role, or lack of a role, in Jewish thought in a different direction. On this point I can only speak as an observer of Judaism, but I would be quite intrigued by Jewish critical comment on S.'s work.

The final chapter, "Scripture and the Human Condition," contains S.'s most important statements of his enterprise. Here he states that scripture has no "ontology," that there is no possibility of explaining what scripture "is" apart from the human beings who make it "scripture" (which takes us back to the perplexing sentence
quoted in the first paragraph). Thus, S. argues that the proper study of scripture belongs to a discussion of religious experience, that it is not primarily a subclass of literary or historical study: "The basic question is not about scripture, but is about us." The primary value of S.'s work is, I think, its ability to stimulate further discussion.

For biblical scholars used to dealing with minute arguments based on nuanced views of specific words, phrases, or sections of text, dealing with the large issues raised by S. seems like playing catch with a medicine ball. Precisely for this reason, it is the kind of discussion that forces biblical scholars into important discussions of the philosophical and historical meaning of their entire enterprise.

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Hans Jürgen Tertel attempts a better "empirical model" for literary development in biblical narrative than J. Tigay's Akkadian epic. For the process of redactional expansion so often invoked to explain existing biblical texts he demands an external verification of actual habits of transmission. Even the relation between Samuel-Kings and Chronicles involves more than simple revision of one Vorlage, with only two developmental stages at best. Only the Assyrian royal annals display repeated revision with direct dependence sufficient to demonstrate the practice of transmission. T. devotes the core of his book to analysis of selected annals of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal. For each text he establishes a hierarchy of dependence, explores the earliest version, and evaluates later revisions. In each case he finds evidence for redactional abbreviation, so that the more complex versions are the earliest. T. concludes with consideration of 1 Kings 20 and 22, two narratives whose formations have commonly been explained as multiple redactional layers. He argues that internal evidence requires no serial revision, and the Assyrian analogy supports complex narrative in the initial rendition.

Introduction of the Assyrian annals into a discussion of textual transmission in the ancient Near East is a substantial contribution to a problem not limited to the field of biblical study. Selection of Sennacherib's first campaign and of four affairs from Ashurbanipal's early career suit the search for repeated revisions which can show the procedure of transmission, though this evaluation would benefit from further attention to the formal scribal culture of Mesopotamia, which does not offer a simple equation to Israelite scribal settings. While the analogy with Chronicles is treated carefully, T. supplies too little basis for choice of the two texts from Kings for his own biblical comparison. This choice assumes bounds for a definition of "text" appropriate for the Assyrian analogy without defending them.

Tertel proposes that Samuel-Kings and the Assyrian annals contain accounts with essentially similar narrative structures, measured by rhetorical intensity and