

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### MYTH, HISTORY, AND INSPIRATION: A REVIEW ARTICLE OF *INSPIRATION AND INCARNATION* BY PETER ENNS

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#### I. INTRODUCTION

Peter Enns has written a stimulating book on the doctrine of Scripture, which likely will become controversial.<sup>1</sup> Scholars and students alike should be grateful that Enns has boldly ventured to set before his evangelical peers a view of inspiration and hermeneutics that has not traditionally been held by evangelical scholarship.

After his introduction, in chapter 2 he discusses the parallels between ancient Near Eastern myths and accounts in the OT. He says that the OT contains what he defines as “myth” (on which see his definition later below), but, he affirms, this should not have a negative bearing on the OT’s divine inspiration. God accommodates himself to communicate his truth through such mythological biblical accounts. Chapter 3 discusses what Enns calls “diversity” in the OT. He believes that the kinds of diversity that he attempts to analyze have posed problems in the past for the doctrine of “inerrancy.” He asserts that this “diversity” must be acknowledged, even though it poses tensions with the inspiration of Scripture. This diversity is part of God’s inspired word.

In chapter 4, Enns shifts to the topic of how the OT is interpreted by NT writers. He contends that Second Temple Judaism was not concerned to interpret the OT according to an author’s intention nor to interpret it contextually nor according to modern standards of “grammatical-historical exegesis.” This hermeneutical context of Judaism must be seen as the socially constructed framework of the NT writers’ approach to interpreting the OT, so that they also were not concerned to interpret the OT contextually. Accordingly, they interpreted the OT by a “christotelic hermeneutic,” which means generally that they had a Christ-oriented perspective in understanding the purpose of the OT, including the meaning of specific OT passages. This also

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). I am grateful to several scholarly friends around the country who have graciously read this review article and have offered very helpful comments in the revising stage.

means that “the literal (first) reading [of an OT text] will not lead the reader to the christotelic (second) reading” (p. 158).

The final chapter attempts to draw out further implications from the earlier chapters for Enns’s understanding of an “incarnational” doctrine of Scripture.

At various points throughout the book, Enns appeals to this “incarnational” notion, contending that since Christ was fully divine and fully human, then so is Scripture. Accordingly, we need to accept the “diversity” or “messiness” of Scripture, just as we accept all of the aspects of Jesus’ humanity. Also at various points in the book is the warning that modern interpreters should not impose their modern views of history and scientific precision on the ancient text of the Bible. Such a foreign imposition results in seeing problems in the Bible that are really not there.

The origin of this book and its strength derive from the author’s attempt to wrestle with problems that evangelicals must reflect upon in formulating their view of a doctrine of Scripture.

Enns has attempted to draw out further the implications of “post-modernism” for an evangelical doctrine of Scripture than most other evangelical scholars to date. He argues that “liberal” and “evangelical” approaches to Scripture both have held the same basic presupposition: that one can discern the difference between truth and error by using modern standards of reasoning and modern scientific analysis. He is proposing a paradigm for understanding scriptural inspiration that goes beyond the “liberal vs. conservative” impasse (pp. 14–15). He wants to “contribute to a growing opinion that what is needed is to move beyond both sides by thinking of better ways to account for some of the data, while at the same time having a vibrant, positive view of Scripture as God’s word” (p. 15). This, of course, is a monumental task that Enns has set for himself. Enns says we must go beyond this impasse, and he presents himself as one of the few having the balance or the new synthesis that solves these age-old debates.

The book is designed more for the lay person than the scholar but is apparently written with the latter secondarily in mind. Enns says his thesis is not novelty, but, in reality, the main proposal for which he contends throughout is “novel”: he is trying to produce a synthesis of the findings of mainline liberal scholarship and an evangelical view of Scripture. Many who will judge his attempt a failure would probably wish that he had written a book that goes into much more depth, and even those who agree with him would probably wish for the same thing.

There is much to comment on in this short book. At some points, especially in the first three chapters, Enns is ambiguous, and the reader is left to “connect the dots” to determine what is his view. This review article is an attempt not only to summarize and evaluate his explicit views but also to “connect the dots” in the way I think Enns does in areas where he is not as explicit. Thus, I quote Enns sometimes at length in order to let readers better assess his views and to try to cut through the ambiguity.

This review will focus primarily on the bulk of the book, which is on the OT (chs. 2–3), as well as part of the concluding chapter (ch. 5). The chapter on

“The Old Testament in the New” (ch. 4) I have reviewed for another journal, since the issues on that subject are of a different nature than the OT discussion, though still as stimulating and controversial.<sup>2</sup>

## II. ENNS'S INCARNATIONAL MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL INSPIRATION

1. *Enns's incarnational model in relation to “history” and “myth.”* Perhaps the overarching theme of the book is Enns's conception of divine accommodation in the process of scriptural inspiration. Scripture is very human, which means that God meets his people in a very human way in his word. This is repeatedly compared to Christ's incarnation: “*as Christ is both God and human, so is the Bible*” (p. 17; likewise pp. 18, 67, 111, 167–68). It is out of the incarnational analogy that Enns develops his view that “*for God to reveal himself means that he accommodates himself*” (p. 109; cf. p. 110). Enns is certainly right to underscore that the divine word in Scripture is also a human word. What this means, in particular, for Enns is that much more “diversity” in the Bible should be recognized by evangelicals than has been typically the case in the past.

In particular, he is concerned that conservatives have not sufficiently recognized ANE parallels with the Bible, particularly the parallels with the Babylonian myth of creation and the Sumerian myth of the cataclysmic flood (pp. 26–27). Enns says that “the doctrinal implications of these discoveries have not yet been fully worked out in evangelical theology” (p. 25). For example, he says that if the OT has so much in common with the ancient world and its customs and practices, “in what sense can we speak of it as revelation?” (p. 31). But, as he acknowledges, these discoveries were made in the nineteenth century, and evangelical scholars have been reflecting on their doctrinal implications ever since the early nineteenth century.

It is important to remark at this point that (1) some evangelical scholars have seen the presence of similarities to supposed ANE myth due to *polemical intentions*<sup>3</sup> (as have some non-evangelical scholars) or to direct repudiation of pagan religious beliefs and practices; (2) and others to a *reflection of general revelation* by both pagan and biblical writers, and only rightly interpreted by the latter;<sup>4</sup> (3) in addition, still others have attributed purported ANE mythical parallels in the OT to a *common reflection of ancient tradition*, the

<sup>2</sup> See G. K. Beale, “Did Jesus and the Apostles Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Revisiting the Debate Seventeen Years Later in the Light of Peter Enns' Book, *Inspiration and Incarnation*,” *Them* 32/1 (2006).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. see in this respect the article by G. Hasel, “The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology,” *EQ* 46 (1974) 81–102. Cf. A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1954) 82–140, who does not believe there is enough evidence to be certain that the OT creation narrative was dependent on the Babylonian one, and concludes that some of the significant differences in the former are unparalleled in either the Babylonian or the Assyrian cosmogonies.

<sup>4</sup> Enns's discussions of wisdom literature and law in chapter 3 would appear to be consistent with this viewpoint.

sources of which precede both the pagan and biblical writers, and the historicity of which has no independent human verification (like the creation in Genesis 1), but is ultimately based on an earlier, ancient divinely pristine revelation that became garbled in the pagan context and reliably witnessed to by the scriptural writer.<sup>5</sup> (4) Yet another view is that revelation did not always counter ANE concepts, but often used them in productive ways, though still revised in significant manner by special revelation. For example, ANE concepts may have helped give shape to the theology of sacred space in the building of Israel's tabernacle and temple (e.g. the eastward orientation, the placement of important cultic objects, the designation of areas of increasing holiness, the rules for access to the Holy Place and Holy of Holies, etc.).<sup>6</sup>

Of course, another option, in contrast to the preceding four views, is that the biblical writers absorbed mythical worldviews unconsciously, reproduced them in their writings, and believed them to be reliable descriptions of the real world and events occurring in the past real world (creation account, flood narrative, etc.) because they were part of their socially constructed reality.<sup>7</sup> Divine inspiration did not limit such cultural, mythical influence. Does Enns agree with this latter view, still nonetheless contending that God used myths to convey truth? Does Enns believe that these OT "mythical accounts" do not contain *essential historicity*, so that he uses the word "myth" with its normal meaning? The following analysis of Enns will contend that his view, while sometimes consistent with some of the four above views in the preceding paragraph, does not primarily align itself with any of them. But he appears to give an affirmative answer to the preceding two questions, though one must work hard at interpreting Enns to come to these conclusions, since, at crucial points in his discussion, he is unclear. It would have been helpful to readers if Enns had acknowledged the above variety of ways that the OT interacts with ANE myth, and where precisely he positioned himself with respect to various OT passages.

According to Enns, the ancient peoples around Israel asked questions about their ultimate being and meaning, and "so, stories were made up," especially about the creation (p. 41). The Genesis account of creation "is firmly

<sup>5</sup> E.g. see D. I. Block, "Other Religions in Old Testament Theology," in *Biblical Faith and Other Religions* (ed. D. W. Baker; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004) 43–78, who, in essence, affirms these first three views, though the majority of the article elaborates on the first perspective. See also Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis* 139, who cites a scholar representing the third view.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. see J. H. Walton, "Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies," in *Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 42; see the entire article (pp. 40–45), which is helpful and in which Walton registers agreement also with the preceding three perspectives on ANE parallels, though aligning himself most with this fourth view. See also Block, "Other Religions in Old Testament Theology" 47–48, who also appears partly to align himself with this fourth view.

<sup>7</sup> See Walton, "Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies" 43, who repudiates such unconscious absorption and use of myth in the OT, while still affirming that "God's communication used the established literary genres of the ancient world and often conformed to the rules that existed within those genres" (p. 41).

rooted in the [mythological] worldview of the time" (p. 27); in other words, the Genesis passage presupposes and utilizes the mythological creation stories circulating in the ANE (including, presumably, the background of the account about "Adam's" creation?). The main point, according to Enns, is to show that Yahweh is the true God and not the Babylonian gods (p. 27). The same conclusion is reached with respect to the Flood account (pp. 27–29).

Enns himself likes the use of the word "myth" to describe these biblical accounts, but how does he define "myth" precisely? Enns says that "not all historians of the ancient Near East use the word *myth* simply as shorthand for 'untrue,' 'made-up,' 'storybook,'" a position with which he appears to align himself (p. 40). Yet, enigmatically, he goes on to define "myth" in the ANE as something apparently very close to this. His formal definition of "myth" is as follows: "*myth is an ancient, premodern, prescientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories: Who are we? Where do we come from?*" (p. 50; similarly, p. 40). Note well that there is no reference to "history" or "actual events" in this definition. But then Enns proceeds to affirm, despite his earlier apparent qualification on page 40 about "made-up" stories, that ANE myths were "stories [that] *were made up*" (my italics; p. 41) and were composed by a process of "telling stories" (p. 41), and that "the biblical stories" of the "creation and flood must be understood first and foremost in the ancient contexts." This means, trying to interpret Enns by Enns, that the biblical stories had "*a firm grounding in ancient myth*" (p. 56; my italics); to reiterate, with specific reference to the Genesis creation account, he says that it "is firmly rooted in the [mythological] worldview of its time" (p. 27). So, what is Enns's view of "myth" in relation to real events of the past?

In this respect and in connection with some of Enns's directly preceding statements, he poses a difficult question:

If the ancient Near Eastern stories are myth (defined in this way as prescientific stories of origins), and since the biblical stories are similar enough to these stories to invite comparison, does this indicate that myth is the proper category for understanding Genesis? [p. 41].

He answers this by asking another question:

Are the early stories in the Old Testament to be judged on the basis of standards of modern historical inquiry and scientific precision, things that ancient peoples were not at all aware of? [p. 41].

He answers by saying that it is unlikely that God would have allowed his word to come to the Israelites according to "modern standards of truth and error so universal that we should expect premodern cultures to have understood them." Rather, more probably, God's word came to them "according to standards *they* understood" (p. 41), which included mythological standards of the time (and, recall once more, that part of Enns's definition of "myth" is that "stories *were made up*" [my italics]; p. 41). He concludes that the latter position is "better suited for solving the problem" of how God accommodated his revelation to his ancient people (p. 41).

Enns acknowledges that beginning with the monarchic age (1000–600 BC) more historical consciousness arises, so that history “is recorded with a degree of accuracy more in keeping with contemporary standards” (p. 43). He immediately adds, however, that a negative answer must be given to the question “can we not also conclude that the same can be said for Genesis and other early portions of the Bible?” (p. 43). He continues, “[I]t is questionable logic to reason backward from the historical character of the monarchic account, *for which there is some evidence*, to the primeval and ancestral stories, *for which such evidence is lacking*” (p. 43). He says the same thing even more explicitly on page 44:

One would expect a more accurate, blow-by-blow account of Israel’s history during this monarchic period, when it began to develop a more “historical self-consciousness,” as it were. It is precisely the evidence *missing* from the previous periods of Israel’s history that raises the problem of *the essential historicity* of that period [my italics].

So, in one respect, we are on somewhat firmer ground when we come to the monarchic period because it is there that we see something more closely resembling what one would expect of “good” history writing by modern standards: a more or less contemporary, eyewitness account.

Likewise, Enns says a little later,

*The Mesopotamian world from which Abraham came was one whose own stories of origins had been expressed in mythic categories . . . The reason the opening chapters of Genesis look so much like the literature of ancient Mesopotamia is that the worldview categories of the ancient Near East were ubiquitous and normative at the time. Of course, different [ancient] cultures had different myths, but the point is that they all<sup>8</sup> had them.*

The reason the biblical account is different from its ancient Near Eastern counterparts is *not that it is history in the modern sense of the word and therefore divorced from any similarity to ancient Near Eastern myth*. What makes Genesis different from its ancient Near Eastern counterparts is that . . . the God they [Abraham and his seed] are bound to . . . is different from the gods around them.

*We might think that such a scenario is unsatisfying because it gives too much ground to pagan myths* [p. 53; my italics].

. . . *God adopted Abraham as the forefather of a new people, and in doing so he also adopted the mythic categories within which Abraham—and everyone else—thought*. But God did not simply leave Abraham in his mythic world. Rather; [sic] *God transformed the ancient myths so that Israel’s story would come to focus on its God, the real one* [pp. 53–54; my italics].

The differences notwithstanding [between Babylonians myths and the Genesis creation and flood accounts], the opening chapters of Genesis participate in a worldview that the earliest Israelites shared with their Mesopotamian neighbors. To put it this way is not to concede ground to liberalism or unbelief, but to understand the simple fact that *the stories in Genesis had a context within which they were first understood. And that context was not a modern scientific one but an ancient mythic one* [my italics].

<sup>8</sup> It is probable here that Enns is including the patriarchs and Israel in this “all.”

*The biblical account, along with its ancient Near East counterparts, assumes the factual nature of what it reports. They did not think, "We know this is all 'myth' but it will have to do until science is invented to give us better answers" [p. 55; my italics].*

To argue . . . that such biblical stories as creation and the flood must be understood first and foremost in the ancient contexts, is nothing new. *The point I would like to emphasize, however, is that such a firm grounding in ancient myth does not make Genesis less inspired* [p. 56; my italics].

It is important to note three things that he has just said in these extended quotations. First, that ancient OT writers did not record history according to modern historical and scientific standards means that they did not recount historical events that corresponded with actual past reality, but which corresponded to ANE myth; indeed, Enns wants to "emphasize" that "such a firm grounding in ancient myth does not make Genesis less inspired" (p. 56)! Thus, uncritical and unconscious absorption of myth by a biblical author does not make his writing less inspired than other parts of Scripture.

Second, and in connection with the first point, Enns says that "the evidence *missing* from the previous [pre-monarchic] periods of Israel's history . . . raises the problem of the essential historicity of that period," which, in the light of all Enns has said above, most likely means for him that these pre-monarchic accounts are not to be viewed as containing "essential historicity."

Third, the main distinction between the ANE myths and Israel's myths lies *not in the latter recording reliable history* but in the latter proclaiming that Israel's God "is different from the gods around them." It appears fairly clear that the distinction between the ANE mythical accounts of creation and the flood and those of the Genesis accounts is not in the former containing non-history and the latter representing reliable historical events, but the difference is to highlight the biblical God as true in contrast to the false ANE gods. This is the primary way, then, that "God *transformed* the ancient myths," not in presenting a historical account that corresponds to past historical reality, but causing "Israel's story . . . to focus on its God, the real one" (p. 54).

Enns concludes his above thoughts by saying, "we might think that such a scenario is unsatisfying because it gives too much ground to pagan myths" (p. 53). Yes, I think that many practicing respected OT and NT evangelical scholars (and not only fundamentalists) will think that he, indeed, has given way too much ground to "pagan myth." In addition to the quotations from Enns that I have italicized above, that Enns affirms that the Pentateuch positively adopts *mythical* notions in the essentially normal sense of the word (i.e. non-historical and fictitious narrative) is also apparent later, when he addresses the question of polytheism in ancient Israel. Here, again Enns explains what he means:

It is important here that we not allow our own modern sensitivities to influence how we understand Israel's ancient faith. *We* may not believe that multiple gods ever existed, but *ancient near Eastern people* did. This is the religious world within which God called Israel to be his people. When God called Israel, he *began* leading them into a full knowledge of who he is, but he started where they were.

We should not be surprised, therefore, when we see the Old Testament describe God as *greater than* the gods of the surrounding nations. In the Psalms, for example, this is seen in a number of passages [p. 98].

I suppose one could argue that the psalmists . . . didn't really intend to be taken literally . . . For the comparison [between God and other "gods"] to have any real punch, both entities must be *presumed* to be real. For example, we may tell our children something like, "Don't be afraid of the dark. God is greater than the Boogey Man." Of course, adults who say this know that the Boogey Man is not real, but they know that their *children* believe he is real. Even in contemporary Christian expression, we compare God to many things: our problems, our challenges, our enemies, and so on.<sup>9</sup> And each comparison is made between two real (or perceived to be real) entities. This is what these Psalms are doing as well [p. 99].

What would have spoken to these Israelites—what would have met them where they were—was not a declaration of monotheism (belief that only one God exists), out of the blue. Their ears would not have been prepared to hear that. What we read in Exodus is perhaps less satisfying for us, but it would have set the ancient world on its head: this god Yahweh . . . meets these powerful Egyptian gods . . . and . . . beats them up [p. 101].

They [Israel] were taking their first baby steps toward a knowledge of God that later generations came to understand and we perhaps take for granted. At this point in the progress of redemption, however, the gods of the surrounding nations are treated as real. God shows his absolute supremacy over them by declaring not that "they don't exist" but that "they cannot stand up against me" [p. 102].

I have quoted Enns as fully as space allows, since his full views should be clearly seen, and my attempt is to present them as accurately as possible within limited space and despite some of Enns's ambiguity. First, he affirms a developmental view (some would call it "evolutionary"), asserting that early on Israel believed in the reality of many mythical gods but only was to worship the one God, Yahweh, and that it was only later that Israel came to have a monotheistic faith. Part of the problem with Enns's developmental view is that he sees the same non-monotheistic view expressed in some of the Psalms, all of which were written after the Patriarchal and early Israelite period (e.g. Psalm 86 is presented as "a Prayer of David"). Enns says that unless these other "gods" are "*presumed* to be real," then the biblical comparisons of God with the other "gods" lacks "punch."

Therefore, he is espousing that early parts of the OT held to henotheism (belief in one god without asserting that this god is the only god). Is this a necessary deduction from the evidence that he has presented? There are other viable interpretative options for understanding the biblical view of these other gods. Some scholars see that there are real spiritual realities behind pagan idols but that they are not divine realities but demonic (e.g. the view is testified to early on in the OT that demons were behind idols: Lev 17:7 [on which see BDB 972]; Deut 32:17). Others would understand that though the OT writers refer to "gods" (sometimes using the very word *ʾēlōhîm* in Hebrew),

<sup>9</sup> The meaning of this sentence is unclear to me.

they are not divine realities at all but a lie or deception.<sup>10</sup> Both these alternatives have just as much “punch,” indeed, probably more “punch,” than making the assumption that these “gods” are really divine realities.

In fact, early on in Israel’s history, there are clear statements against the existence of any other gods besides the God of Israel: in the directly following context after the statement in Deut 4:28 that Israel “will serve gods, the work of men’s hands,” twice God is said to be the only truly existing God (Deut 4:39, “the Lord, he is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other”; Deut 4:35, “He is God; there is no other besides him”).<sup>11</sup> This Deuteronomistic affirmation is developed later in the OT (2 Kgs 19:18; Jer 2:11; 5:7). Hence, when Moses calls God “the God of gods” in Deut 10:17 he is not assenting to the existence of other deities, but affirming “Yahweh’s supremacy over all spiritual and heavenly powers.”<sup>12</sup> In this light, there is no need to compare God’s relationship with early Israelites to parents who allow their children to believe in the boogey man.

However one evaluates Enns’s positive approach to “myth,” what should be kept separate is the notion of “history” and “scientific precision.” Recall that he acknowledges elsewhere in the book that modern views of history are very comparable to the historical consciousness of Israel’s scriptural historians beginning around the tenth century BC. Thus, his apparent equation of a modern historiography and modern science in the preceding quotation should be qualified: could there not be “history” as we understand it in the OT, including Genesis, but not an expectation that these same writers would intend to write with scientific precision? I think the answer is that OT writers record history as we would understand it as “events that happened,” and which correspond to past reality, but they do not attempt to record in some sort of strict chronological fashion or with so-called modern “scientific precision” (which, of course, are kinds of accepted history writing done even in modern times). To say that ancient people could not narrate history in a way that sufficiently represented actual events of the past because they were not modern historians is a false dichotomy.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the word *ʾlōhīm* can also be applied to earthly idols (e.g. Exod 34:17; Lev 19:4; 1 Chron 16:26; 2 Chron 13:9; Ps 96:5; Isa 37:19; 42:17; Jer 16:20) or, often, generally to gods that the nations (or apostate Israel) worship (Exod 34:15–17; Num 25:2; Deut 6:14; 7:16), though most references in the latter category also most probably refer to mere idols or idols that represent gods. Other uses of the word refer to angels in the heavenly realm (Ps 97:7; 138:1; cf. Job 38:7: “sons of God”), and it may be that the word can refer to malevolent angelic-like deities dwelling also in the heavenly realm (see Job 1:6; 2:1; Gen 6:2, 4, where “the sons of God” [*bēnê-hā ʾlōhīm*], according to many commentators, refers to fallen angels), and viewed as divine by some humans (cf. perhaps Jer 7:18; in the NT see 1 Cor 8:5; cf. Eph 3:10; 6:11–12). Paul captures well the OT view when he alludes to Deut 4:35 in 1 Cor 8:4 (“there is no God but one”), and then in vv. 5–6 says “for even if there are so-called gods” and “many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God,” and in 1 Cor 10:20 affirms that the “so-called gods” are “demons.”

<sup>11</sup> Of course, critical scholarship would date Deuteronomy around the sixth century BC, so that, according to this view, these statements of Deuteronomy would be seen as arising later in Israel’s history.

<sup>12</sup> Block, “Other Religions in Old Testament Theology” 57.

I want to repeat and underscore that Enns himself states that beginning with the tenth century BC history “is recorded with a degree of accuracy more in keeping with contemporary standards” (p. 43). If so, why could not earlier writers have written with the same historical awareness? What is particularly troubling about Enns’s view is that he does not include “essential historicity” in his definition of the kind of “myth” contained in the OT (see the above quotations in this respect, e.g., p. 44) in distinction to ANE myth, which is how he categorizes the creation and Flood accounts in Genesis (and also possibly the narratives about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as the event of the Exodus, since they are also pre-monarchic, recalling that all pre-monarchic historical narratives, for Enns, face the problem of “essential historicity” in contrast to monarchic history writing; does he see a historical core to such narratives, and if so, how much or how little?).<sup>13</sup>

It would be good if Enns could tell us the grounds upon which one can decide what parts of OT history are historically true and which are not, since some scholars may think that there are more places than Enns has pointed out where mythical or legendary material is positively affirmed by biblical writers. Even when he says that the history recorded in the monarchic period of Israel’s time is more reliable than earlier history recorded in the Pentateuch, how can we be sure of that, since there may have been other mythical traditions in circulation that had affinities with significant strands of that monarchic history and which could cast doubt on the veracity of that history?

Thus, it *may be* true that Enns almost never makes the explicit *verbal* statement that the mythical accounts in Genesis and Exodus are not historical, but he more often conveys the concept. Nevertheless, the following quotations (that I repeat), especially when understood in their contexts, are virtually explicit statements that these biblical accounts are not essentially history but myth.

The reason the biblical account is different from its ancient Near Eastern counterparts is *not that it is history in the modern sense of the word and therefore divorced from any similarity to ancient Near Eastern myth*. What makes Genesis different from its ancient Near Eastern counterparts is that . . . the God they [Abraham and his seed] are bound to . . . is different from the gods around them [p. 53; my italics].

*The biblical account, along with its ancient Near East counterparts, assumes the factual nature of what it reports. They did not think, “We know this is all ‘myth’ but it will have to do until science is invented to give us better answers”* [p. 55; my italics].

*The point I would like to emphasize, however, is that such a firm grounding in ancient myth does not make Genesis less inspired* [p. 56; my italics].

Strikingly, the second quotation even affirms that biblical writers “assumed the factual nature” of their “reports,” even though they were really not factual but “myth.”

<sup>13</sup> His discussion suggests strongly that he would not take these accounts in their fullness to be reports corresponding to real events of the past.

Therefore, the most probable assessment of his view so far is that *conceptually*, at the least, he affirms that the biblical writers imbibed myths at significant points, recorded them, and, though they were not essentially historical, they naïvely affirmed such myths as reliable descriptions of the real world because they were part of their socially constructed reality. Furthermore, divine inspiration did not restrain such social-cultural osmosis. John Walton's assessment of non-evangelical approaches to the ANE and the OT is generally applicable to Enns's: "the attempt has been made to reduce the Old Testament to converted mythology whose dependency exposes its humanity."<sup>14</sup> There are, however, three important caveats to be made about his approach that differs from the customary non-evangelical approach: (1) he believes the point of the Pentateuchal mythical narratives, like that of the creation and of the Flood account, is to highlight for Israelites that their God is to be worshipped in contrast to the other ANE gods. (2) Enns apparently sees more reliable history being recorded beginning with Israel's monarchic period. (3) He believes the Bible is fully inspired by God.

It is at this point that brief reference needs to be made to his chapter on the use of the OT in the NT (chapter 4) in order to provide another example that Enns believes that the Bible records myths that are "essentially un-historical." In that chapter, he recommends for further reading an article that he wrote on 1 Cor 10:4.<sup>15</sup> There he repeatedly labels as "legend" Paul's reference to the purported Jewish tradition about "the rock that followed" Israel in the wilderness. I have included my analysis of his discussion elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> It is an interesting question to ask why in his book Enns never calls the reference in 1 Cor 10:4 a "legend" but he does so explicitly and repeatedly in his article. It is apparently not because he has changed his mind, since he recommends without qualification his article at the end of chapter 4. Or, indeed, has he changed his mind since writing the article? Thus, Enns presents us with another ambiguity, this time between his book and his recommended article.

So, at the end of the day, one has to read Enns very closely over a number of pages to exegete precisely what he means by "myth." I have adduced some extended quotations, and when we let "Enns interpret Enns" from one part of the book to another, letting his clearer statements interpret the unclear, the likely conclusion is that he uses "myth" still in the essentially normal sense, that is, stories without an "essential historical" foundation (trying here to use his very language).

2. *The question of recording "objective" history in relation to the incarnational model.* In connection to the preceding section, Enns also says that

<sup>14</sup> "Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies" 43.

<sup>15</sup> "The 'Moveable Well' in 1 Cor. 10:4: an Extrabiblical Tradition in an Apostolic Text," *BBR* 6 (1996) 23–38.

<sup>16</sup> See my forthcoming review article of Enns's fourth chapter (on his view of the use of the OT in the NT), "Did Jesus and the Apostles Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?"

“one must question the entire assumption that good history writing, whether modern or ancient, is concerned to transmit only bare facts of history. Is there really any such thing as a completely objective and unbiased recording of history, modern or premodern?” (p. 45). There may be some scholars, both evangelical and non-evangelical, who hold the assumption that Enns is arguing against, but the majority of conservative OT and NT scholars who publish in their fields today would not hold such an assumption. This does not mean, on the other hand, that evangelical scholars who agree with Enns’s general premise—that all history is not completely objective—agree with his own deduction of what this premise means for the reliability of historical events recorded in the Bible. Enns thinks this assumption entails the following:

If the Bible does not tell us what actually happened, how can we trust it about anything? Simply put, the problem before us is the historical character of precisely those Old Testament narratives that seem to report historical events [p. 45].

Though there is a rhetorical tone in the first question of this quotation, the words are Enns’s own, and they appear to express his skeptical view of the reliability of events reported in purported historical narratives, as the second sentence further suggests. It is apparent that Enns’s overall point in this quotation, understood within the context of his discussion here, is to affirm that “interpreted history” means significant varying degrees of distortion of the record of that history for the purpose of making a theological point. Accordingly, one’s trust in such biblical narratives is to be in the theological point being made and not in the actual factuality of the events recorded in these narratives. But cannot historical writers interpret events without distorting the description of how those events occurred? Leading conservative OT scholars answer in the affirmative, but Enns does not make the reader aware of these views.<sup>17</sup> For example, I know of a Jewish scholar who is convinced that the NT account about Jesus’ resurrection is historically reliable but he disagrees with the NT’s interpretation of the resurrection, that is, that the resurrection indicates that Jesus is the Messiah for Gentiles *and* Jews (this Jewish scholar believes Jesus was the Messiah only for Gentiles).

3. *Enns’s incarnational model in relation to Jesus’ incarnation.* What is curious in Enns’s attempt to argue for an incarnational analogy for the doctrine of Scripture is that he never attempts to define what he means by Christ’s incarnation (i.e. the relation of his human to his divine nature) and, especially, what aspect of it he thinks helps to clarify how God accommodates

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., the first six essays, and bibliography, in *Giving the Sense* (ed. D. M. Howard and M. A. Grisanti; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003); in particular, see Howard’s convenient listing of such leading scholars contributing in varying degrees to this area as Dever, Rainey, and Hurwitz, and evangelicals such as Long, Provan, Hoffmeier, Hess, Younger, Millard, and Baker (“History as History,” *ibid.* 51). See also G. R. Osborne, “Historical Narrative and Truth in the Bible,” *JETS* 48 (2005) 673–88, who makes the point with respect to both OT and NT historical narratives. Enns does cite works by Hess and Long (on p. 69), but he does not engage their arguments.

himself by revealing his truth through such things as “myth.”<sup>18</sup> Some evangelical theologians speculate that while the human Jesus was perfect morally, he was still imperfect in such things as mathematical computation or historical recollection (e.g. some say, could not Jesus have made a “B” on his fifth grade math test? Or could he not have cut a board wrongly from the instructions of his human father?). On analogy with this conception of Jesus’ incarnation, Scripture is God’s absolutely faithful word about morals and theology (e.g. the way to salvation) but not about minute points of history or scientific facts.

Does Enns hold a view like this? If this is Enns’s incarnational model (and we have to make our best speculation, since he does not tell us), then its success depends on, among other things, the problematic presupposition that cognitive information not dealing with issues of morality and salvation (historical facts, scientific facts, etc.) can, indeed, be neatly separated from morality and salvific issues.<sup>19</sup> But we cannot elaborate on this particular model of the incarnation in evaluating Enns, since Enns does not reveal what is his view of the incarnation.

But whatever is Enns’s precise view of Jesus’ incarnation, his very attempt to compare Jesus’ incarnation with revelation in God’s word may not work as a good analogy. Some evangelical scholars affirm that NT Scripture is the result of the exercise of Christ’s prophetic office through prophetic and apostolic writers and that this is the best framework through which to understand the nature of Scripture. An incarnational model may not be the best because, whereas with Christ’s incarnation there is one person with two natures, with Scripture there are two persons (God and the human prophet) and one nature (the one scriptural speech act).<sup>20</sup> Thus to try to make the analogy may be like comparing apples to oranges. At the very least, the analogy must be carefully qualified, since it cannot “walk on all fours.”<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, Enns not only does not qualify his view of the incarnation, but he never tells us what it is.

<sup>18</sup> Note some of the places where Enns appeals to the incarnational model but without explaining his precise view of the human nature of Jesus as it relates to the human writers of Scripture: pp. 17–18, 109, 111, 167–68.

<sup>19</sup> It might be added that since Jesus said he did not know certain things, such as the precise time of the final destruction of the cosmos (Matt 24:35–36), then his cognition was not only limited but faulty. This, however, has not been deemed by the Church to reflect a human limitation entailing error: a self-imposed lack of knowledge is different from an erroneous claim. Scripture never qualifies any of Jesus’ statements by saying that his ignorance means he could say something false about or not know the truth about the past or the present.

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Henri Blocher for suggesting this.

<sup>21</sup> Enns (p. 18) himself acknowledges this caveat about the incarnational metaphor, but he never explains what aspect of the analogy does fit. On the other hand, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 86–87, 303–10, 460–61, who attempts to point out the specific aspects of Christ’s incarnation that are helpful analogues to an understanding of the hermeneutical meaning of Scripture; e.g. he says, in arguing for a determinate yet thick meaning of Scripture, “as the Logos indwelt the flesh of Jesus, so meaning indwells the body of the text” (p. 310).

## III. ENNS AND BIBLICAL DIVERSITY

1. *The apparent use of the term "diversity" in place of "error."* Enns sees that "diversity" is part of the warp and woof of Scripture: "diversity is such a prevalent phenomenon in the Old Testament" (p. 107; similarly, p. 108). His definition of "diversity" is not clear: does it refer to various but complementary viewpoints or to irreconcilable perspectives on a given topic? At the least, it would appear to mean that it is difficult to harmonize what different biblical writers say who speak to the same issue. It would appear that he has turned the Reformers' notion of the perspicuity of Scripture on its head and affirms that there is so much diversity in the OT that our view of inspiration must be reassessed. Furthermore, he says, if we were to use our modern definition of "error," we apparently would judge that there are errors in the Bible. But Enns says that we cannot use modern definitions of "error" to judge biblical literature and that the best term to use is "diversity":

for modern evangelicalism the tendency is to move toward a defensive or apologetic handling of the biblical evidence, to protect the Bible against the modernist charge that diversity is evidence of errors in the Bible and, consequently, that the Bible is not inspired by God. Unfortunately, this legacy accepts the worldview offered by modernity and defends the Bible by a rational standard that the Bible itself challenges rather than acknowledges (p. 108).

The messiness of the Old Testament, which is a source of embarrassment for some, is actually a positive. On one level it may not help with a certain brand of apologetics, where we use the so-called perfection of the Bible to prove to nonbelievers that Christianity is true. But this method is as wrongheaded as it is to argue that Christianity is true by downplaying the humanness of Christ [p. 109].

This is another example of using his view of Christ's incarnation without defining the view (it would seem that his definition implies that Christ made mistakes of, e.g., a mathematical or historical nature, but that he was reliable in his moral and theological statements, though I may well be wrong about this implication). He does appear implicitly to draw the analogy, which he thinks to be fallacious and the opposite of his comparison, of the "wrong-headed" view of "the so-called perfection of the Bible" with "downplaying the humanness [imperfection?] of Christ" and highlighting his divine perfection.

But is there another logical fallacy in Enns's attempt to affirm that the OT cannot be judged by modern standards of "error" (e.g. pp. 80, 108)? Enns's view appears to be non-falsifiable: if a liberal scholar finds a mistake anywhere in Scripture, Enns would say that the biblical writers operated with a different view of "error" than our modern conception. So, what would count for a biblical writer being in "error" according to their own ancient standards? Enns never formulates an ancient conception of "error," and until he does, his position must remain more speculative than the so-called "modernist" with which he disagrees. It is likely for this reason that Enns does not use the word "inerrancy" to describe his own view (as far as I can tell, he only uses it once [p. 168] as a word others may use to describe their view). It is important to recall that the doctrine of inerrancy was espoused as an orthodox

notion long before the Enlightenment and modernism (from the time of the early Fathers up through the Reformers and until the end of the twentieth century).<sup>22</sup> Enns's claim is that new ANE discoveries and certain aspects of postmodern thought now make "inerrancy" an anachronistic idea. The reader will have to determine whether Enns has succeeded in overturning in a groundbreaking manner this long-held notion in order to think of scriptural truth through different lenses.

2. *Epistemology and the relation of historical to mythological genre.* These issues that Enns discusses touch on epistemology. I cannot enter into a full-orbed view of the epistemology to which I ascribe and how this relates to logic and the modernist-postmodernist debates. Suffice it say the following. The laws of contradiction (or non-contradiction) and identity would seem to be part of the faculties of all human beings, as a result of their creation by God in his image. Without these abilities humans would not be able to communicate with one another or perceive correctly (not exhaustively but definitely in part) the created world. Enns seems to have confused the use of reason, which is an aspect of general revelation, with certain kinds of purported modern history writing and precise kinds of modern scientific knowledge. But these most basic laws of logical thought are quite operable for both modern and pre-modern people. Indeed, people could not communicate without assuming the truth of these foundational notions of logic (if I say something is red, it means that it is red and not green; or if I say the Chicago White Sox won the world series last year, I mean they won it and not the New York Yankees). When people do not presuppose these most basic laws of thinking, then they have difficulty communicating and living in the world. The same is true with ancient communication.

In this respect, and in conjunction with these most foundational notions of human thinking, speech act theory is also helpful to consider. Scholars should be interested in trying to perceive the authorial intention of ancient authors. Just as ancient people performed acts of a physical nature, so they committed acts of speech communication. And, just as we can perceive physical acts, so we can perceive the intentions of speech acts, not exhaustively but partially and sufficiently<sup>23</sup> (indeed, this is just what Enns is also trying to do). Speech acts are transcultural. The debate concerns the illocutionary mode of the biblical writers' speech acts. Enns contends that the Pentateuch's speech acts in which early history is narrated are a kind of divine genre, whereby God uses what appears to be a historical genre but which is

<sup>22</sup> On which see for the earlier Fathers, e.g., J. D. Hannah, "The Doctrine of Scripture in the Early Church," in *Inerrancy and the Church* (ed. J. D. Hannah; Chicago: Moody, 1984) 3–5; and W. R. Spear, "Augustine's Doctrine of Biblical Infallibility," in *Inerrancy and the Church* 37–65; generally, see *Inerrancy and the Church*, *passim*; and John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), *passim*, who also includes a good section on the earlier Fathers.

<sup>23</sup> See further K. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*

really to be understood as “myth,” through which God accommodates himself to the mythical notions of the time and teaches truth (just as he teaches truth through parables). The problem with Enns’s view is that what appears to be historical genre (compared with other accepted historical genres later in the OT), he sees to be ultimately mythical. We might even call it a genre of divine accommodation, whereby God knew better but the Israelite writers did not. They thought they were writing true history but God knew that they were not. In this respect, has Enns formulated a new version of “*sensus plenior*”?<sup>24</sup> In reality, in this respect, Enns’s view is not new, but is close to being a flashback to Gerhard von Rad’s view that OT writers wrote what appeared to be historical accounts, which were theologically true on a “salvation-historical” plane, but which possessed no essential connection with true, past historical reality.<sup>25</sup>

Should scholars not have the moral and cognitive care to discern both modern and ancient speech acts? If an OT author’s speech act intends to communicate something as part of a historical genre (in its illocutionary form), but a modern commentator concludes that it is really myth and justifies this by appeal to divine accommodation to myth unknown to the ancient author, is this not a twisting of the ancient author’s intentional speech act? Enns’s view appears to be a novel proposal of an incognito genre of divine accommodation to myth, which was originally unknown by the ancient author and which was originally encased in a historical genre.

Neither Enns nor his evangelical debate partners can get away from using modern analytical abilities and interpretative methods. By the use of the same analytical skills, Enns and other evangelicals disagree about whether or not there is myth in the Bible. The question is whether or not Enns has presented a “reasonable” case for the ancient authors not using the basic reasoning abilities common to human beings, when these authors wrote historical narrative. Many will not be convinced, except those already on the road to reaching the conclusion that Enns has about “myth.”

3. *Conclusion on Enns’s use of the word “diversity.”* Therefore, if Enns were to use what he considers a “modern” definition of “error,” would he conclude that what he labels “diversity” is really error? The answer is not hard to determine: most likely, at several points, he would conclude this. So, his use of “diversity” some of the time appears to be the semantic equivalent to “error” for those who disagree with him and think that the basic standards of truth and error are still the same for ancient and modern people (remembering, of course, that modern historians have a variety of modes and genres to narrate what we would consider “reliable” history, and that modern people often make statements about reality that are reliable but may not be made

<sup>24</sup> In the unlikely case that he is not positing such a *sensus plenior*, then the onus is on him to demonstrate that what appears as a historical genre in such Genesis accounts as the creation and flood is not such a genre but a mythical kind of literature.

<sup>25</sup> For a convenient summary of this aspect and problem of von Rad’s theology, see W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 1.512–20.

with the knowledge of or in the language of scientific precision, since that is not their intention). Thus, Enns insists on the term “diversity,” since he opposes judging ancient writers by the modern standards of truth and error. Does Enns imbibe too much postmodern relativity about truth or has he been “chastened” properly, so that he has been affected by some of the strengths of postmodernism? Readers will make different judgments about this. For myself, I think he has been too influenced by some of the extremes of postmodern thought.

#### IV. SOME IMPLICATIONS OF ENNS’S BOOK FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

The intent here is to summarize some of the major themes running throughout the book, upon which we have only earlier briefly touched, as well as to look at some of the practical ramifications of Enns’s book that he himself discusses.

1. *The issue of socially constructed cultures, presuppositions, and biblical interpretation.* Running throughout Enns’s book is the following presupposition: “there is no absolute point of reference to which we have access that will allow us to interpret the Bible stripped of our own cultural context” (p. 169; cf. p. 161). One paragraph later, he says that “our theologies are necessarily limited and provisional” (p. 169). I cannot respond at all fully to this. Nevertheless, while it is true that postmodernism (and earlier, the Dutch Reformed tradition!) rightly has taught us that all things are seen through interpretative lenses, so that no human viewpoint is objective, on the other hand, “soft postmodernists” acknowledge that interpreters can understand some things definitely and sufficiently but not exhaustively. Any other epistemological approach takes the insights of postmodernism to a skeptical extreme.<sup>26</sup> Enns is not clear here, since, in apparent contrast with his preceding statements, he also proposes several interpretations of biblical passages where it is clear that he would say that he understands them sufficiently and definitely but not exhaustively. Thus, he operates at numerous points on the assumption that we do have an “absolute point of reference to which we have access that will allow us to interpret the Bible,” despite the fact that we are influenced by our own cultural context.

His discussion on page 169 thus lacks clarity, and, therefore, gives the impression that to understand any particular part of the Bible definitely is impossible, and that when we think we have grasped part of biblical revelation in some definite way, we have imposed our own cultural presuppositional lenses onto the biblical data. In the context of his book, however, I take it that what Enns really means here (on p. 169) is that the main presuppositional lenses that evangelicals have imposed onto Scripture are

<sup>26</sup> On which see more fully D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 104–24, where also helpful non-postmodern epistemological models are offered.

standards of modern reason (definitions of truth and error with respect to history and science), especially as this relates to the definition of “myth.”

Enns states that “*the problems many of us feel regarding the Bible may have less to do with the Bible itself and more to do with our own preconceptions*” (p. 15). As we have seen, for him both so-called liberals and evangelicals have the same preconceived notion for determining truth and error, though they have disagreed about whether or not there is error in the Bible; both have formulated a definition of truth and error on the basis of modern science and modern conceptions of history. Enns says that we must go beyond this impasse, and he portrays himself as one of the contemporary “evangelicals” able to formulate the new synthesis that deals much better with these long-disputed issues. But, as we have seen elsewhere, Enns sets up two polar opposites and does not allow for middle ground concerning possibilities of some significant overlap (not equation) between ancient and modern notions of science and historiography.

As far as I can tell, he has repeated something like the problem found in the work of Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), who also contended for not interpreting the Bible according to the same modern notions (with a quite similar result to Enns: the Bible can have what we moderns would consider error but the ancients would not have so considered it).

This review is already too long, so I must refer to the larger discussion of John D. Woodbridge and his critiques of Rogers and McKim along these lines,<sup>27</sup> which is representative of other conservative critiques. Generally, the upshot of Woodbridge’s conclusion is that ancient peoples “did have categories at their disposal for assessing” the observable world “that are in some regards commensurable to our own.”<sup>28</sup> In addition to the supporting literature cited by Woodbridge, there are more recent publications analyzing ancient mathematics, astronomy, and measurements showing their technological complexity and degrees of significant overlap with modern equivalents.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), e.g. generally see pp. 19–30, and, in particular, see pp. 28–30 (titled “The Dubious Presuppositions Concerning the History of Science”), 158–63; generally, see pp. 19–27, for other critiques relevant also to other parts of Enns’s own work. Woodbridge discusses such issues as the continuity between ancient and modern mechanics, astronomy, mathematics, measurements of space, and measurements of time. One brief quotation is relevant: “In the period of scholarship from 1880 until quite recently, most scholars were operating with two severe handicaps. One of these was a consistent and drastic underestimation of the scientific achievements of the Babylonians and the ancients in general” (p. 162, quoting Shlomo Sternberg in Solomon Gandz, *Studies in Hebrew Astronomy and Mathematics* [KTAV, 1970] viii–ix). Interestingly, Woodbridge says that we moderns “do not attempt to give the full mathematical designation of the symbol  $\pi$ ; we usually proffer our approximation, 3.14, which is very close to one of the Babylonian designations for  $\pi$ , 3 and 1/8” (*Biblical Authority* 162).

<sup>28</sup> *Biblical Authority* 163.

<sup>29</sup> Most recently see *Under One Sky, Astronomy and Mathematics in the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. M. Steele and A. Imhausen; Münster: Ugarit, 2002), as well as bibliography cited at the end of the articles therein.

It is also quite apparent that Scripture uses the word “true/truth” to affirm that ancient people could make descriptive statements that corresponded, not exhaustively but truly, to actual reality. Likewise, Scripture uses words such as “know” to indicate that the ancients could know things sufficiently that corresponded to the reality around them.<sup>30</sup> Concerning historiography, note the following position of a recent work by leading conservative OT scholars: “modern historians, like their precursors, in fact depend on testimony, interpret the past, and possess just as much faith as their precursors, whether religious or not,” and, in addition, “ancient, medieval, and post-Reformation historians as a group were no less concerned than their modern counterparts with differentiating historical truth from falsehood.”<sup>31</sup>

In the light of the comments in the preceding two paragraphs, I want only to point out a major gap in Enns’s discussion with regard to studies of ancient science and some significant scriptural evidence that shows it to be based on selective evidence, thus skewing the evidence that he has chosen to present. Enns could have acknowledged some of the work that has been done in these areas, even if he disagrees with it. This would have been helpful to readers to know that to posit such an “ancient-modern” polarity on issues like science, logic, and historiography is a reductionism. This results in over-generalized labeling, such as “pre-scientific” (or “pre-modern”) and “scientific” (or “modern”; e.g. pp. 40–41), when, in reality, some significant scholars argue that there is a significant spectrum of positions between these two polar opposites.<sup>32</sup> There is a sense, however, in which Enns is clearly correct in his contention that we should not evaluate ancient biblical writings by typical modern scientific conceptions and presuppositions, but Enns curiously never mentions it: to assess reports of the miraculous in biblical historical narratives to be non-historical because of a modern bias against the supernatural distorts a correct understanding of these ancient narratives.

In this connection, Enns says that modern preconceptions can distort the Bible (see also pp. 14–15), since the ancient biblical culture had different preconceptions about the reality of the world. There has, however, also been scholarly discussion about how different presuppositional paradigms share some commensurable features, otherwise “members of one paradigm could

<sup>30</sup> See Carson, *Emerging Church* 188–200; see also A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 411: “In Greek literature and in the Old and New Testaments there are abundant examples of uses of the word ‘truth’ in which the point at issue is correspondence with the facts of the matter.”

<sup>31</sup> Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 50.

<sup>32</sup> Enns also employs such contrasting labels as “liberal and evangelical [or conservative]” (e.g. pp. 21, 41, 47, 107–8) throughout his book, even though he himself admits at the beginning that while “such labels may serve some purpose . . . they more often serve to entrench rather than enlighten” (p. 14). My main difficulty with the way Enns uses these labels is that he associates “conservative” or “evangelical” scholars’ views with popular “fundamentalist” views, which is not accurate; there is certainly, at least, a spectrum of theologically viable approaches among such scholars, which is consistent with a traditional perspective on inerrancy (as, e.g., represented by the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy).

never understand the culture of individuals living in another.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, there is some kind of bridge between worldview perspectives, whether between that of ancient cultures and that of modern or between different perspectives of modern people themselves who disagree.

Enns needed to reflect awareness of this discussion, even if he evaluates it negatively. Of course, Enns himself also has his own preconceptions (which he surely would admit), and these are preconceptions formulated by his own socially constructed reasoning abilities. Why could not his preconceptions be the ones that are distorting Scripture? How do we test the validity of preconceptions or presuppositions? The best way is by means of what some call a “critical realism.”<sup>34</sup> That is, as we just noted, people holding different paradigms of interpretation can still communicate with one another and understand and evaluate each other’s paradigms. That presuppositional lens which makes the most sense of the most data is the more probable lens. Of course, neither Enns nor I have the space to submit our lenses to the test of “critical realism.” All we can do is to say that our lens is an approach that has made the most sense of the biblical data at which we have looked, and then we can footnote our published works and let others peruse those works and see how well our lenses work.

2. *Enns and the ethics of hermeneutics.* Lastly, Enns understands that the proposals of his book will arouse disagreement, and he pleads for a hermeneutic of humility, love, and patience. He wants to be heard out before readers react negatively. He says,

It has been my experience that sometimes our first impulse is to react to new ideas and vilify the person holding them, not considering that person’s Christian character. We jump to conclusions and assume the worst rather than hearing—*really* hearing—each other out. What would be a breath of fresh air, not to mention a testimony to those around us, is to see an atmosphere, a culture, among conservative, traditional, orthodox Christians that models basic principles of the gospel:

*Humility* on the part of scholars to be sensitive to how others will hear them and on the part of those whose preconceptions are being challenged.

*Love* that assumes the best of brothers and sisters in Christ, not that looks for any difference of opinion as an excuse to go on the attack.

*Patience* to know that no person or tradition is beyond correction, and therefore no one should jump to conclusions about another’s motives.

*How* we carry on this very important conversation is a direct result of *why*. Ultimately, it is not about us, but about God. [p. 172].

<sup>33</sup> Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* 28, 161, who cites and summarizes the significance of the work of Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

<sup>34</sup> E.g. see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 3–144, and Beale, “Questions of Authorial Intent, Epistemology, and Presuppositions and Their Bearing on the Study of the Old Testament in the New: a Rejoinder to Steve Moyise,” *IBS* 21 (1999) 1–26.

These last four points are well put, and all scholars should keep them in mind. But some readers, in retrospect, will recall places where Enns himself needed to keep in mind these excellent guidelines. The reason I point these things out here is not to criticize Enns but because Enns has made it clear in the directly preceding extended quotation that it is those evangelicals against whom he is writing whom he believes have been guilty of violating these very good standards. Even in the above quotation, he portrays “conservative, traditional, orthodox Christians” as those whose “first impulse” is “to react to new ideas and vilify the person holding them not considering that person’s character”; they “jump to conclusions and assume the worst” of those who propose such new ideas. Such people “wish to keep” God “small by controlling what can or cannot come into the conversation” (p. 172). Is Enns conscious of his outstanding guidelines when he paints “conservative, traditional, orthodox Christians” with such a sweeping brush? Perhaps, unfortunately, Enns has experienced these things from some conservatives, but this does not justify such a generalization without extensive footnote support. Furthermore, this kind of emotive language will not encourage further conversation with those whom he disagrees. It is ironic that these comments come in the immediate context of his exhortation to pursue love, patience, and humility.

With specific regard to his exhortation to “humility” note the following comments that he makes earlier in the book: “Should Paul’s comment [about 1 Cor 10:4] be understood as another example of this tradition [about the Jewish legend of a traveling well-shaped rock that followed Israel throughout the wilderness wanderings<sup>35</sup>]? I think that is beyond a reasonable doubt” (p. 151). There are well-known commentators,<sup>36</sup> even some who do not believe in inerrancy, who disagree with Enns’s statement here, so that it would have been more helpful to express his conclusion in more diplomatic terms in order to allow for more dialogue.

Similarly, he comments on the interpretation by some evangelicals that Jesus’ cleansing of the temple at the beginning of his ministry in John 2 is a distinct event from the cleansing narrated toward the end of his ministry in the Synoptics. In response to this interpretation of two cleansings, Enns says, “it is a distortion of the highest order to argue that Jesus must have cleansed the temple twice,” which he thinks is based on the “unwarranted assumption” that “good historiography . . . must maintain chronological order” (p. 65). Consider the prominent scholars who hold the position of two cleansings: among others, note A. Plummer, B. F. Westcott, R. V. G. Tasker, R. G.

<sup>35</sup> The bracketed wording in this quotation is my insertion. See Enns, “The ‘Movable Well’ in 1 Cor 10:4: and Extrabiblical Tradition in an Apostolic Text,” for his use of “legend” in connection to 1 Cor 10:4, upon which I comment in my forthcoming review article in *Themelios* noted above.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. see E. E. Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* (1957; repr. ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 66–70. See also the forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation on 1 Cor 10:4 by my research student Peter Spychalla.

Gruenler, Leon Morris,<sup>37</sup> D. A. Carson,<sup>38</sup> and more recently A. Köstenberger,<sup>39</sup> as well as Craig Blomberg, who leans toward two cleansings but believes that neither position has adduced enough evidence definitively to settle the issue.<sup>40</sup> These are not scholars who have a historiographical predisposition against topical arrangement of Gospel material nor would practicing conservative evangelical scholars consider the arguments for their view “a distortion of the highest order.” Unfortunately, this is an unduly confident statement by Enns, as well as one that distorts this issue in Gospels studies.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps one could pass over these kinds of comments, but Enns continues to make them. He says, “therefore, if what claims to be a Christian understanding of the OT simply remains in the preeschatological moment—simply reads the Old Testament ‘on its own terms’—such is not a Christian understanding in the apostolic sense” (p. 159). But there are very good Christian OT scholars who would beg to differ but would not, I suspect, say that Enns’s hermeneutical approach is “not a Christian understanding.” While I myself believe that the progressive, eschatological revelatory stage of the NT is decisive for understanding the Old, I believe the Old interprets the New, and that a Christianly conceived messianic understanding can be discovered by reading the OT itself. I am not concerned to defend my statement but merely to say that we should be careful of saying that opposing interpretations are “not a Christian understanding.” This would seem to be the very thing Enns is contending against—a so-called fundamentalist “black-and-white” view of things.

In another place, Enns says that to “mount arguments showing that apostolic hermeneutics is actually grounded in the grammatical-historical meaning of the Old Testament, and that all this talk about the Second Temple context is just nonsense that can be safely avoided” is “untenable because the Second Temple evidence cannot be ignored—or better, it can be ignored only by means of a willful choice to disregard the plain evidence we have” (pp. 159–60). First, perhaps Enns has laypeople in mind or some idiosyncratic evangelical scholar, but I know of no evangelical scholar who disagrees with Enns who would say that “all this talk about the Second Temple context is just nonsense” or that it should be “ignored.” Is this setting up a “straw man” for the lay reader and then knocking it down? This reveals a pattern at points throughout the book, where Enns erects the position of his opponents in such extreme form that no reputable conservative scholar who

<sup>37</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 166–68, where also references to Plummer, Westcott, Tasker, and Gruenler may be conveniently found.

<sup>38</sup> Carson, *Matthew* (EBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 441.

<sup>39</sup> Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 111.

<sup>40</sup> Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001) 87–91. See also R. A. Whitacre, *John* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999) 82, who views both options as equally possible, and H. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 115, who is ambiguous about his view on the issue.

<sup>41</sup> Enns makes the same kind of statement when he says, “for any interpreter, modern or ancient, to appeal to Deuteronomy 33:2–4 to support a notion of angels mediating the law *is an indication of what they wish to find there, not what is there*” (p. 149, my italics).

would disagree with his general views could identify himself or herself. Has Enns expressed himself consistently here according to his own ideal hermeneutical standards that he lists above (e.g. to “jump to conclusions” about the motives or views of others)?

Similarly, he says with respect to ANE discoveries that “conservatives have tended to employ a strategy of selective engagement, embracing evidence that seems to support their assumptions” (p. 47). For example, he says,

Many evangelical scholars do excellent historical work but do not always squarely address the doctrinal implications of their own findings. More than once, I have observed evangelical scholars pursue a line of argumentation about Genesis or some other topic, come close to drawing out the logical implications for how we understand the Bible, but then retreat to traditional, safe categories. Likewise, and perhaps more commonly, problematic evidence is simply ignored or dismissed in an effort to protect the Bible (or better, one’s beliefs about how the Bible should be). Even worse, simplistic and irresponsible arguments are sometimes mounted that serve no purpose other than to affirm established positions [pp. 47–48].

If Enns is going to make this accusation, which represents traditional evangelicalism, is it not incumbent on him, at least, to footnote the representative examples of the “many evangelical scholars” and their works that he has in mind? Without proper documentation, this not only appears misrepresentative but could well give the reader the wrong impression and mislead. In addition to citing such scholars, he needs to explain how they selectively use their evidence and how they do not face up to the evidence that they themselves discover. Without such “fleshing out,” Enns’s statements become platitudes without any basis for the reader. Furthermore, there have been a number of good OT and ANE evangelical scholars who should not be described in this manner (among others, I think, e.g., of Donald Wiseman, Alan Millard, Kenneth Kitchen, Meredith Kline, Daniel Block, John Walton, Lawson Younger, and Richard Hess). These scholars in one way or another have shown how important ANE parallels are for understanding the OT, as well as how the OT differs from such parallels, and several of these scholars have shown the viability of the historical accounts in Genesis and elsewhere in contrast to the non-historical nature of their mythological correspondences. Many, including non-evangelicals, would acknowledge that these and conservative scholars before them have attempted to relate their faith commitments to “what we have learned about the Bible over the past 150 years,” contrary to the claims of Enns (in this regard, cf. Enns’s wording on p. 48 in relation to the preceding context; similar to the claim that he makes on p. 171).

Likewise, Enns says,

there is a significant strand of contemporary Christian thinking on the Old Testament that feels that these sorts of things [diversity in scripture] just shouldn’t happen. And, if they do, they just *appear* to be a problem. You just need to read a bit more closely or do a little more research, and if you’re patient enough, you’ll get the right answer eventually. For others, however (including myself), such an approach comes close to intellectual dishonesty. To accept the

diversity of the Old Testament is not to “cave in to liberalism,” nor is it to seek after novelty. It is, rather, to read the Old Testament quite honestly and seriously [p. 107].

No one should doubt that Enns is “sincere” in attempting to interpret the Bible “honestly,” but for him, on the other hand, to imply, as he appears to do, that those who disagree with him (i.e. not a few people but those who are “a significant strand of contemporary Christian thinking”) practice “an approach [that] comes close to intellectual dishonesty” is, again, not an expression of the excellent hermeneutical ideals that he elaborates above (e.g. not to “jump to conclusions” about the motives or views of others; p. 172). Why can he not grant that other scholars who differ with him also seek “to read the Old Testament quite honestly and seriously”? The clear implication is that conservative scholars are not “serious” and “honest.” And, if he sees such egregiously bad methods practiced and bad motives held by such scholars, he should quote them and point out the evidence for his conclusions. Again, he has painted a wide swath of evangelical scholarship with this reductionistic brush (though I do not doubt that some evangelicals, laypeople, and perhaps a few scholars with whom he has had contact have been guilty of the accusation that he makes).

Nevertheless, Enns’s ethical hermeneutical guidelines are an excellent reminder of how to dialogue with those with whom we disagree. May all biblical scholars attempt to model these standards, which none of us will perfectly model until we see Jesus face to face in glory or at the eschaton.

## V. CONCLUSION

A review article could be written on each of the five chapters in Enns’s book. I have quoted Enns often and at length in order to attempt as much as possible within the confines of this essay to try to present his statements in context and to attempt to reveal his authorial intention. Many of his assumptions are so wide-ranging and debatable, the primary evidence of the OT, Judaism, and the NT so selective,<sup>42</sup> as well as the secondary sources he cites,<sup>43</sup> that it is hard to do justice in evaluating his book in a brief manner. Nevertheless, I have tried to review the book as accurately as I could, which has resulted in a longer than usual review article and some inevitable repetition at points.

My critique of Enns may be broadly summarized by the following eight points in the order for the most part that I have discussed them:

<sup>42</sup> In this respect, see my forthcoming earlier-cited article in *Themelios* on Enns’s view of the use of the OT in the NT in relation to Judaism.

<sup>43</sup> Enns does cite bibliography for “further reading” at the end of most of the chapters (with very brief abstracts), but he does not engage them evaluatively in the body of his chapters. This often leaves uninformed readers with the impression that Enns’s perspective and evidence for his arguments is the primary or only viable perspective or evidence. The only way they would learn otherwise is by doing some research and reading in secondary literature.

- (1) He affirms that some of the narratives in Genesis (e.g. of Creation and the Flood) are shot through with myth, much of which the biblical narrator did not know lacked correspondence to actual past reality.
- (2) Enns appears to assume that since biblical writers, especially, for example, the Genesis narrator, were not objective in narrating history, then their presuppositions distorted significantly the events that they reported. He appears too often to assume that the socially constructed realities of these ancient biblical writers (e.g. their mythical mindsets) prevented them from being able to describe past events in a way that had significant correspondence with how a person in the modern world would observe and report events.
- (3) Enns never spells out in any detail the model of Jesus' incarnation with which he is drawing analogies for his view of Scripture.
- (4) Enns affirms that one cannot use modern definitions of "truth" and "error" in order to perceive whether or not Scripture contains "truth" or "error." First, this is non-falsifiable, since Enns never says what would count as an "error" according to ancient standards. Second, this is reductionistic, since there were some rational and even scientific categories at the disposal of ancient peoples for evaluating the observable world that are in some important ways commensurable to our own.
- (5) Enns does not follow at significant points his own excellent proposal of guidelines for evaluating the views of others with whom one disagrees.
- (6) Enns's book is marked by ambiguities at important junctures of his discussion.
- (7) Enns does not attempt to present to *and* discuss for the reader significant alternative viewpoints other than his own, which is needed in a book dealing with such crucial issues.
- (8) Enns appears to caricature the views of past evangelical scholarship by not distinguishing the views of so-called fundamentalists from that of good conservative scholarly work.

Peter Enns might believe that my assessment of his book and its implications is inaccurate, but it would be difficult for him to contend that the evaluation and implications could not be construed as plausibly following from the statements he has made. In other words, he might contend that the conclusions and implications that I have drawn are not conclusions and implications he would draw, but I think many, if not most, readers would likely read him the way that I have. In some cases, perhaps, I have pointed out what is perchance the result of faulty writing or ambiguity rather than faulty theology or hermeneutics. Nevertheless, such things must still be pointed out, since the issues are so significant.

The nature of this book has demanded not only mere description of the author's views but, at times, also interpretation because of the ambiguities and tensions among his statements. Anyone who wants to attempt to review this book thoroughly and to do justice to it will have to engage in interpretation of these kinds of statements. I have tried my best to do this and to cut through the ambiguities where they occur. Readers will have to decide for

themselves whether or not I have succeeded at those points where I have been forced to interpret.

Indeed, why write a lengthy review article of a book that is designed primarily to address a more popular audience and only secondarily a scholarly readership?<sup>44</sup> The reason is that the issues are so important for Christian faith, and popular readers may not have the requisite tools and background to evaluate the thorny issues that Enns's book discusses. But I have also written this review for a scholarly evangelical audience, since the book appears to be secondarily intended for them,<sup>45</sup> and, I suspect, there will be different evaluations of Enns's book by such an audience.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps it is fitting that a *Neutestamentler* should review the chapters on the OT in Enns's book, since he himself has written a chapter on the NT, which, for the most part, I have not included in this review. As Christian biblical scholars, despite our specialties, we need as much as possible to be whole-Bible scholars as well. Cross-fertilization between the testaments is healthy, and I hope that it can continue. This book has been harder to review than any other that I have ever reviewed, but I thank Peter Enns for making me think in more depth about the issues that he raises in this book.

<sup>44</sup> Note where Enns indicates his purpose in addressing a more popular audience (e.g. pp. 13, 15, 168), though these statements do not exclude a scholarly audience.

<sup>45</sup> E.g. the publishers distributed complimentary copies to biblical scholars at the recent November, 2005 Institute for Biblical Research meeting.

<sup>46</sup> Indeed, I have already read reviews that differ in their evaluation of the book: e.g. see the reviews of M. Eschlebach in *JETS* 48 (2005) 811–12, T. Longman, "Divine and Human Qualities of the Old Testament," *Modern Reformation* 14 (2005) 33–34, M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas), *Denver Journal: An Online Review of Current Biblical and Theological Studies* 8 (2005), and B. C. Ferry in *New Horizons* (October 2005) 23–24.