

BOOK REVIEW

Greek Myth and the Bible. By BRUCE LOUDEN. Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019. Pp. viii + 241. Hardback, \$140.00. ISBN978-1138328587.

Christians often appropriated elements from so-called pagan temples in the construction of their churches. Christians and Jews did much the same in the construction of their sacred narratives. Since the discovery of the *Gilgamesh* epic, scholars have studied how the Hebrew Bible employed elements that originated outside of Israel in the Near East: the myth of Flood, for example. Building upon his earlier work on the relationship between the *Odyssey* and Near Eastern cultures,¹ Louden shifts the locus of his interest westward; he argues that Christians and Jews often built their sacred narratives from pre-existing mythical structures originating in ancient Greece. The Bible, he shows, is partly a response to Greek culture. This is an extraordinary book that has much to tell us both about Greek myth and legend and their reappearances in different guises throughout biblical narratives.

Louden begins with a very brief historical excursus demonstrating that Israelite culture had sustained contact with ancient Greece (5-8). “Of the many types of Greek myth that Israelite scribes found useful for their own agendas,” he says, “the larger cycle of Trojan War myth proved most relevant and most attractive for Joshua through 2 Kings” (14). The figure of Agamemnon, for example, seems to have been drawn upon in the depictions of Saul and Ahab (17), Agamemnon in the *Iliad* providing a model through which to explore problems related to kingship and problematical kings.

Part I concerns the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and Greek myth. Chapter 1 (37-56) explores intersections between Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Genesis, both involving creation myths and also featuring similar characters who serve as genealogical agents: Iapetus and Japheth. Chapter 2 (57-85) concerns the relationship between the Greek myth of Ion and the biblical patriarchs (Abraham, Jacob and Joseph). Both sets of stories are organized around the themes of a founding preserved in a basket, painful childlessness, covenant given by a god and, finally, the figure of a father who begets a nation or nations (57). Loudon finds

parallels between Abraham's abortive murder of Isaac and Creusa's plan to kill Ion. The theme of the deceived father—Xuthus and Isaac—is prominent in both myths. Chapter 3 (86-110) studies the Argonautic myth and its influence on Genesis 27-33: dispute over inheritance, a young man undertaking a journey east with divine aid, labors imposed upon him for the winning of a bride and flight from a father-in-law all appear in the Argonautic myth and in the story of Jacob's journey to Haran to win Rachel from the devious Laban. Chapter 4 (111-30) sees Euripides' Hecuba and her killing of the Thracian king Polymestor behind Judges' account of Jael's slaying of Sisera, both accounts unfolding in the aftermath of their culture's great wars: The Trojan and Canaanite Wars.

Part II takes up the question of Greek myth and its influence on the Christian Bible. The brief Chapter 5 (133-43) sees Ovid's account of the myth of Phaethon and the Sun—tragic consequences arising from a father's rash promise—underlying the narrative of the dance of Herod's daughter and the father's reckless oath. Chapter 6 (144-62) argues that Homeric scenes of postponed recognition were a major influence on Luke 24, where disciples encounter—and fail to recognize—Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Tellingly, Jesus disappears from their sight in a way that has many Homeric parallels (155). Chapter 7 (163-174) studies Euripides' *Alcestis* as the source for Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead in John, both Jesus and Heracles linked by friendship and sacred bonds of hospitality to the families of Alcestis and Lazarus. Chapters 8 through 10 (175-219) take up the question of classical myth and its relationship to Revelation.

Louden's book is a revelation and allows us to view biblical stories in new ways. His analyses are largely dependent on positing late dates for many biblical stories, and some readers may raise questions on the matter of dating. Inevitably, questions will also arise as to extent to which *parallels* prove the operation of *influence*. Nonetheless, readers of Homer and the Bible will learn much from this book.

Classics and biblical scholarship have for too long been marked off as separate scholarly disciplines. Studying the relationship between Hellenism and Judaism harkens back to 19th-century projects and concerns. In a more religious age, Gladstone, for example, sought to define the relationship between the Homeric poems and the Bible. He decided that both are complementary revelations from God, the Bible offering theology and the Homeric poems depicting the way to live the good life. In the same year that sees the publication of Louden's book—and also from Routledge—John Heath argues provocatively that we would be better off with Homer's gods than with the God of the Hebrew and Christian

Bibles.² Old questions are receiving new answers in the field of Homeric scholarship.

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¹ Bruce Louden, *Homer's Odyssey and the Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

² John Heath, *The Bible, Homer, and the Search for Meaning in Ancient Myths: Why We Would Be Better Off with Homer's Gods* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019).