

READING SACRED TEXTS

CHARITY, STRUCTURE, GOSPEL



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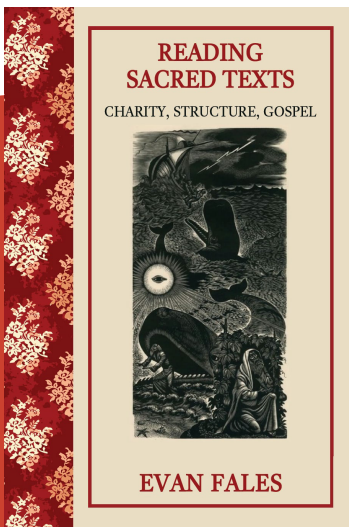
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About The Author:

Evan Fales has spent his teaching career at the University of Iowa. Interested especially in metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of science and of history, he has worked, for roughly twenty-five years, on issues in the philosophy of religion, among them the problem of evil, the causal efficacy of divine volitions, the evidential implications of mystical experience, and the metaphysical foundations of morality. His interest in the Bible emerged from a series of happenstances during the course of his graduate education at Temple University.



Reading Sacred Texts

Charity, Structure, Gospel

Drawing significantly on the work of Emile Durkheim and Claude Lévi-Strauss, this book proposes a way to navigate between two pitfalls that undermine comprehension of alien cultures and their sacred literature. First, it offers a vigorous defense of the principle of charity when interpreting religious texts. But this, then, must confront the oddity, even deep implausibility, of many religious claims. The "way out" of this dilemma takes seriously Durkheim's seminal hypothesis that religious belief systems reflect native efforts to understand the social realities of their society. It brings to bear Lévi-Strauss's claim that the structure of religious narratives reflects attempts to bring intellectual order to those realities in a way we can decipher through the use of certain analytic techniques.

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Book Excerpt

I. A Requiem for Miracles

What, then, can be said about the matter of how to approach the miraculous? After all, miracles are the fish bones that stick most pertinaciously in the skeptic's craw—not only because the religious conjure salvation by invoking them but because they are flatly unbelievable and the skeptic has a suitcasefull of miracle stories that even the religious will agree are fraudulent. Although the issue does not lie at the heart of my project in this book, its position as a watershed problem is insured by the fact that it has both metaphysical and epistemological implications.

If miracles have occurred, then that surely implies something significant about the way the world is causally ordered and about what (or who) so orders it. Again, if there are or might be miracles, we must face questions about how they are to be identified: whether it is the proper business of science and historiography to do so, or whether other means must do it. And if the biblical miracle stories are false, then that may tell us something about the prospects, not only for Christian soteriology but also for assessment of the historical reliability of Scripture.



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