

the source material. Though Rigney faithfully incorporates literary context, there were times that a reader would benefit from familiarity with the plot or characters.

Whether one agrees with Rigney's assessment of Lewis on any given topic, *Lewis on the Christian Life* deserves to be read for Rigney's methodology and voice alone. His presentation is humbly accessible and honest while retaining a dynamic conversational feel. Points of disagreement feel less like an academic debate and more like remembering encounters with an old friend. I can think of few better ways to re-encounter Lewis's influence upon the Christian life.

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**Jennifer Agee. *Systematic Mythology: Imaging the Invisible, Winged Lion*, 2018, \$19.50 (paperback), 378 pp.**

Jennifer Agee's recent book *Systematic Mythology: Imaging the Invisible* (2018) explores the ways in which myth-making enables us to communicate theological truths as well as to participate in the story that God is telling through all of creation. Agee's book began its life as her master's thesis, the culmination of her degree at Warburton Theological Seminary. In it, Agee re-envisioning theology itself as mythopoeia and systematic theology as systematic mythology—hence the title. This core claim is heavily informed by two sources: mythopoeia as a field of study and Paul Tillich's 'method of correlation.' The extent to which readers resonate with Agee's claims will likely depend on their knowledge and opinion of these two influences as well as their familiarity with the academic discipline of systematic theology.



In the first chapter, "Seen and Unseen," Agee paints a general picture of systematic theology and theology from several vantage points. The overall picture is one in which "the idea behind stories ... in Scripture" are extracted in an attempt to "[articulate] them in a rational, logical system," in dialogue with the creeds and "in conversation with neighbors" (3). Systematic theology, as an attempt to derive "rules, systems, and logic" from stories

(Scripture), is thus envisioned as a laudable and heroic, yet unfortunately flawed, effort to comprehend an incomprehensible God (4). Agee concludes that the only discipline which can hope to fill this gap or serve as the “means by which man discerns and conveys truths otherwise inexpressible” is imaginative narrative or mythopoeia (Levenson, Sinai and Zion 104-04; qtd. by Agee 55). Convinced that embodied humans are always informed and animated by narrative forms of communication, Agee concludes that even “theologians and scientists” must “‘prove’ their cases through narrative” (7). Facts and argumentation are important, she concedes, but *mythos* is the ‘truest’ medium of communication.

The chapters of Agee’s book are deliberately structured as a series of explorations leading to a conclusion. In chapter one, having previously defined myth as the truest medium of theological communication, Agee courageously tackles the behemoth-like question, “What Is a Myth?” Upon concluding that myths are “language images or narratives about the gods or God that are significant and imaginative” at the end of chapter two, Agee explores in chapters three and four the meaning of *significance* and *imagination* respectively. Chapter five addresses the meat of her proposal regarding the practice of mythopoesis or myth-making. Her definition is rightly informed by the work of “famous Christian storytellers” like George MacDonald, J.R.R. Tolkien, Madeleine L’Engle, and C.S. Lewis (58). Rather than defining mythopoesis as a merely creative enterprise, in line with her thesis about systematic theology, Agee skillfully draws on a quote from Lewis to argue that it is a kind of “original (or particular) exegesis” (60). Mythopoesis thus requires practitioners to hone and wield an “exegetical imagination” (56-62). Her final chapter seeks to unite the whole project, in order to paint a coherent picture of systematic theology as systematic myth-making. This last chapter is informed in several ways by Kristin Jeffrey Johnson’s excellent doctoral thesis on George MacDonald.

The crux of Agee’s argument is that the only way to rationally organize and systematically describe “the Author of all our stories” is through “imaginative articulation” or myth-making (4). Because imagination functions as the only human mental faculty or “interface” capable of translating transcendent truths, it is indispensable (36). Additionally, since mythopoeia is the “language of ultimacy,” it is the only way to describe truths that reside in an unseen world (39). Because these truths of “ultimate [Tillichian] concern” cannot be “reduced to lists of principles,” and because they are shaped and informed by “events” or narratives, Agee argues that they can only be depicted through imagery first exegeted from and then embedded in imaginatively interpreted narrative. In other words, given the narrational format of human existence and the invisible nature of so much of God’s truths, systematic theology must rely on systematic mythopoesis: to think theologically is to think mythopoeically.

While there is much to applaud in Agee's work, I would not give her a standing ovation. Her definition of systematic theology is flawed and logically it begs the question. Given that the book's core argument hinges on this definition it is a major problem. As I mentioned previously, Agee draws heavily on Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* (1951-1963). In his three-volume work, one of Tillich's main concerns was to formalize an apologetic method: to develop a repeatable way of translating the internal proclamations or dogmatic claims of Scripture to different situations or external problems in the world. Agee appears to incorrectly equate Tillich's methodology—his method of correlating or translating these truths—with systematic theology itself. As a result, she incorrectly defines the task or goal of systematic theology as translating truths embedded in stories into rational principles/logic. Her conclusion, that the only way to carry this task out is by embedding rational principles or truths *back* into stories (myths), inevitably follows. This sympathetic definition suits Agee's project well. It fails, however, to capture the real practice of systematic theology, which is *to reconstruct or articulate Christian claims by organizing historic sources, concepts, and doctrines around a core principle*.

Agee's work functions well as an argument for why and an example of how we should communicate theological truths by embedding them in stories through mythopoeia. It accomplishes this even though it fails to address the actual practice and discipline of systematic theology. There is a considerable case to be made for the wisdom of smuggling theology into stories, but as a profession that is not what systematic theologians do. The Christian church needs both Karl Barth and C.S. Lewis because they each have unique roles to play. Lewis repeatedly reminded his readers that he was not an academic theologian precisely because he understood the difference between the lofty practices of both storytelling and systematic theology.

Agee is at her best when she moves beyond summary to communicate theological truths in personal, imaginative, and moving ways. Indeed, toward the end of the book Agee practices what she preaches through the inclusion of several well-written short pieces of mythopoeic theology. Fans of this literary approach to theological truth-telling—particularly fans of Tolkien, MacDonald, and Lewis—will find Agee's arguments about the strengths of mythopoeia and the power of the imagination deeply resonant and energizing. In this way, Agee's work functions well as an introduction to mythopoeic theology and as an excellent summary of the field.

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