

The Historical Writings

It is always said of the Judaeo-Christian tradition that it is an historically-based faith. There are several important dimensions to this claim, whose implications we should examine, not least because it is an area where there are frequent misconceptions, which like any misconceptions can bring the Gospel itself into disrepute.

Clearly the claim is of vital significance: we are not a people whose obedience is to a cluster of ideas or ideals, or to the shape of a particular fable or story with no basis in fact. We are gathered around a person - Jesus of Nazareth - who lived an historical life on the same earth we tread, and who contributed to human history on the same basis as we do. Our response to Jesus of Nazareth is governed by two *theological* statements, each of which has to be separately absorbed by us.

- We value him above all else because his presence opened our historical human experience to divine life. This does something radical to our understanding of what human life is or can be, and changes everything in the compass of what can be called human. Morally, for instance, the limitations of human activity are detonated by the presence in the human family of the divine person. In terms of our ultimate destiny, our former limitations are equally annulled. In the phenomenon of historical persons adapting their living-out of humanity in his name, we can say that Christ revolutionises history itself; when this is verified, and historical persons are transformed, we speak of sanctity – a kind of life which witnesses in history to Christ’s transcendence of history.
- but secondly as soon as we mention the divine life of Jesus Christ we need a whole different vocabulary and a new conceptual dimension to speak of it: we err in trying to apply the discourse of pre-Christian humanity to the new, transformed situation¹. It is important to keep in mind that whilst immense gifts are delivered to the human situation by his arrival, we must not speak of any corresponding enlargement of the reality of God. God is ultimate *reality*, but remains *superhistorical*, so that the actual person of Jesus becomes an interface between the finitude of historical humanity and the eternal infinity of God.

The exploration of this interface is the task of Christology, which is obviously a quite different discipline from history. There remains a question as to what the proper competence of historical thought might be in discussing this interfaced reality: and this is where the claim to be an historically-based faith is controversial.

After all, there is not the slightest doubt that Jesus of Nazareth lived an historical life; even Professor Dawkins must accept that. It is therefore possible - and essential - that we should speak of Jesus historically; but this can only reach a little way into the truth of Christ. So we have rules to keep intellectually, out of the respect that is due to our hearers: even Paul had to learn how to speak on the Areopagus. As with every other theological discipline, we have to cope as ministers with the fact that the world we live in acknowledges as “real” principally what is empirically testable; we may lament this as unbearably limiting, but it is a principle consecrated by many practitioners of science (though not all, by a long way) and by a predominant section of modern philosophers: so that even élite thinkers like Bertrand Russell can assert that if questions are raised that can’t be answered by scientific enquiry, they are simply non-questions, and can only lead people into confusion if they’re asked of them. I am

¹ In the encounter between Jesus and individuals, particularly in the Fourth Gospel, we can see this demand for new dimension of discourse dramatised: in particular Nicodemus (Jn 3), the Woman of Samaria (Jn 4) and the disciples at the Last Supper (Jn 13-16) spring to mind

pleased to say that religion has so far recovered its influence in the last forty years that this particular form of vanity is receding in its influence.

One of the long suits of the Bible as a literary collection is the wealth of historical writing that it contains; but there is a vital difference between historical writing and the telling of stories. We need to distinguish carefully between the two; and it isn't easy, because it requires that we should treat appropriately writings whose authors may not have had any conception of the distinction we want to make.

Having said that, we assume at our peril that the authors we are reading were literary or intellectual infants. Think of a story like that of Jonah: there may be fundamentalists aplenty who will believe in its literal truth; one of them was surely not the author who wrote it with such affectionate humour. But what of the saga-like stories at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, whose historical authority was such a bone of contention for the Victorian Church of England? What should shock us is not that the Bible should contain such a variety of literary forms, but that so utilitarian a century as the nineteenth should be so capable of proposing them as any kind of factual reporting.

When we come to the study of the historical writings properly so-called in the Bible, we should recognise that besides the spectacular chronicles of the royal house of David we can use the very existence of the many other styles of writing the Bible contains as an historical source to illuminate the civilisation in which Jewish history was expressed. It is widely agreed that the quality of the chronicles in Samuel 1 & 2, Kings 1 & 2 can rise to heights not surpassed by the classical historians of ancient Greece. The writing is clear, exalted, and of great narrative power; the picture of David himself is one of a clear-sighted honesty which commands respect and a certain sort of love. The drama played out between Saul and David is retailed with devastating detail, as the older man senses his authority failing and his junior's rise to greatness. Saul appears as a depressive, often manically abandoning his royal dignity in the desperate urge to be rid of his eventual successor.

The historical deposit, however, is even there quite open to elements we should probably identify as folklore and popular tradition. It is perfectly common even today for the less searchable areas of biography to be supplemented by unverifiable pieces of gossip and oral tradition. So it is hardly surprising to read stories like the slaying of Goliath; the setting is familiar to us from English story-writing: a swaggering and brutal foreign champion, of preternatural size and strength, is threatening our side. David appears with nothing except his stone and sling, the weapons with which he was used to defending his sheep from marauding animals. This is the classic story of the defenceless hero triumphing over the enemy in his pride; it is also the nomadic shepherd defeating the settled military array. *Se non é vero, e ben trovato* - if it isn't true, it's still worth telling, and it has given us spectacular sculpture by Bernini, Donatello and Michelangelo. Michelangelo's David in Florence may be more of a political statement about the Florentine state under threat from Pisa than a great monument of religious faith; but Bernini's Roman marble is worthy to stand in company with religious works, and such treasures are articles of faith just as are pieces of conciliar dogma or Papal Encyclicals. We should study artistic responses to the Bible with respect and openness.

The functioning of religious stories is a multifaceted and multi-disciplinary study. We might make a massive list of fields in which we could follow through this theme. Simply to ask what significance the stories of the Creation in Genesis have had in your own life would yield a lifetime of interest! In the last study-day we followed through the theme of the Exodus in just a few of its various functioning modes in the tradition; it has furnished Judaism with its foundation myth, its annual defining celebration (the Passover) and patterns of initiation (the redemption of the firstborn, for instance). It has coloured the Psalter over and over again: it has contributed massively to the devotional imagery surrounding the Divine: God is the one who destroys wars, rules the wild waters of the sea, makes a path through the deep, creates

life and death, is faithful to his chosen, is the maker of covenants, the one who weds his chosen; he is their guide through the fearful desert, the bestower on them of the Promised Land. God keeps faith with his servants the Prophets, letting no word of theirs fall to the ground. He is the giver of Law and the fountain of superhuman justice. Indeed, it would be an interesting study to search the legal tradition of the actual Hebrew nation for the moulding effect on it of the traditions of the Torah - not just the massive body of apodictic law, therefore - *thou shalt* and *thou shalt not* - but the story of the giving of the land from the hand of God, its conquest by Joshua, and its partition among the tribes at Shechem: the principles of justice drawn from the justice of God who condemned and executed his justice upon Pharaoh King of Egypt.

Irrespective of people's decision for or against the existence of God and the import or insignificance of religion, the particular tenor of the Jewish law, finding its wellspring in the divine life of a transcendentally just God, still massively dominates the legal and ethical history of the world. It does this because it consecrates its own particular brand of altruism - the doing of justice not for the good of the community at large, or for one's own peace of mind, but because of the justice of the Eternal. And it depends not on any human theory of what is owed us because of our nature, but on the quality of the sovereign life of God, who looks to human understanding and theorising for absolutely nothing. This God is not the product of legal development or of theological theory. He is the God who has been encountered within the stories of a people. He is a God of stories.

This independent transcendence of God is based on the knowledge that he comprehensively contradicted the enslavement of Israel, despite the power of Pharaoh, despite the worm having penetrated the minds of his chosen, and by his outstretched hand and mighty arm he accomplished his will: the figures of Moses and Aaron, his earthly intermediaries, themselves bending and wilting under the divine power that used them as a fulcrum in human history. In the understanding and apprehension of this narrative self-understanding the story is essential, and the faith with which it is received makes possible the comprehension of the world in a way that can contradict what appear to be determining facts. This is the reason why, when the Israelites speak of the Torah - Law - they are referring not to scrolls of interlocking legalisms, but to the stories of Eden, of the patriarchs, of the Exodus, of the taking and sharing of the Promised Land. This is a way of writing history that is unique. It isn't that it *ignores* facts. It is that the *determining* facts it recognises are different from those chosen by the world in which the story actually unfolds. But the fact that the story does unfold - makes history - testifies to the reality of God, and the validity of the Hebrew mindset, which seeks for the meaning of the world *not* in any of its inherent qualities - as a scientist or a secular historian would - but in the revealed mind of a God who is above the whole Universe and all of its facts. Interface, again, is the key to understanding; and the precise way in which the sacred history of Israel prepares for the coming of Christ can be seen for what it is.

This means that there can be a quite different receptivity to stories in the Hebrew mind. If the Gradgrind mentality of a postmodern world is interested in only one kind of truth - the limited sort that can be physically tested - it differs profoundly from the Biblical world, which is basing its wisdom on the mind of a transcendent God, a world that can receive valid messages from ways of discourse disinterested in any earthbound veracity. It isn't a contradiction of the empirical way of verification if we ask ourselves to enter into such an attitude towards the literature of the Bible. Empirical verification works in the physical sciences, and must be obeyed by physical scientists in all they do. But of itself it is an impediment to the investigation of divine truths, and must be allowed to rest while the Divine is being accessed in more appropriate ways.

The corollary of this is that we must take particular care ourselves that we do not sell stories that have no historical obedience (the story of Jonah, for example) as if they had. We are also

obliged to begin the investigation of more central factors in the deposit of revelation to see if we are treating them properly.

For example, to take the bull by the horns from the beginning: it seems perfectly clear to me that in the phenomenal fact of the life of Jesus we are treading the very margin I've been discussing between historical facts and the divine truths whose expression cannot belong to ranges of statements about historical facts. When we find ourselves shuddering with embarrassment over the collecting of relics epitomised in Frederick the Wise (?) Luther's protector², we are no more than acknowledging the ease with which we can transgress in this area. Fr Herbert McCabe noted in an excellent posthumously-published essay that in the entire Nicaeo-Constantinopolitan Creed there is only one clause that is historical:

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried

Every other assertion in the Creed demands faith, and is to some extent a metaphysical proposition; this one is a brutal piece of historical reportage. That it sits so alone in the midst of so exotic a brew of religious language, and yet is recited with apparent inattention alongside all the rest, of a Sunday morning, shows that we believers can be very unconscious about the language we are using. This should warn us to be careful, should God ever let us loose in a pulpit. Let us, therefore, consider the assertion that comes next in the Creed:

On the third day he rose from the dead

Jesus' entry into death was thoroughly historical, and receives particularly sharp personal eyewitness testimony from the Fourth Evangelist (Jn 19:31ff). But what are we to say about his subsequent career? Clearly the attempt to treat it as an historical *sequel* to his death, as if one could fix a time for it, and film it, and narrate it as history – is *specifically ruled out* by the treatments it receives in *each* of the four Gospels³, where the normal rules of historical behaviour are suddenly and definitively flouted. The grave, whose furnishings and dispositions *are* part of history, is rearranged and empty, which might appear to suggest a piece of subsequent history. The one who died on the cross is subsequently encountered alive in all four Gospels⁴, but his appearance is changed, not continuous with his former aspect; at least one story depicts the seers spending a full day speaking with him without recognising him. Even during formal, fully-lit encounters, seers report hesitation, confusion, and certainty in almost equal measure. His arrivals and departures do not obey the physical laws of the world we inhabit.

It could not have been made more clear that the Resurrection, whilst thoroughly linked to the last historical fact of the earthly life of Jesus, is an entrance into a realm where the rules of historical discourse no longer apply. It is a formal transcendence of what went before, and therefore to discuss it we need to leave behind the questions and the mode of answers which spring to minds restricted to the earthbound conditions in which the world-that-doesn't-live-in-God lives its restricted life.

² He owned amongst other things soot from the Burning Fiery Furnace, milk from the Virgin Mary, and a feather from the Holy Spirit's Dove-From-Above costume.

³ The very marked differences between the Gospels at this vital point tells its own story (literally).

⁴ Although the first Gospel (Mark) only includes this fact in a subsequent addition in different handwriting from that of the Gospel's body, and there are signs suggesting that the original Gospel did not include such an encounter

The Gospel Is A Story

There is a great difference between the effect of a story and the effect of any other mode of discourse. The assumption of a story is that it can be looked at from outside: we do not tell people what they already know, but what is new to them. A story is assumed to be unknown to those who hear it, and it can be looked at from outside, as if from an unbiased point of view.

Jesus himself favoured this kind of story-telling, because it involved his hearers in a process of judgment. "Imagine a sower going out to sow his seed...." Immediately the hearer has a sense of freedom; he is imagining someone not himself, a situation he isn't in, he is launched upon a kind of contemplative foray. As the story unfolds, he is brought to acknowledge an interest, a variety in what happens; and at the end he will be allowed to make his mind up about the meaning of what he has heard.

The parable is the most apparently simple of these stories; it can be only two or three lines long. Let us choose one at random (Mt 13):

⁴⁴ The kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field
which someone has found;
he hides it again,
goes off in his joy,
sells everything he owns
and buys the field.

The story is so short, and is over almost before it has started. There is a paradox unresolved in the first line: between *treasure* and *field*. The hiddenness makes the field into two things: it is a piece of undistinguished land like any other (to the untutored eye). But it is also charged with hidden value (to the one who has discovered the secret. Those who are untutored treat the field with indifference. Those in the know sell everything (else) they have in order to buy it. The paradox is then shifted to the customers *and also* to the owner of the field. The owner must not be apprised of the treasure, because he will refuse to sell the field. So there is a theme of secrecy in the story; hidden treasure has to be known about before its value can be sought. Now the story is out in the open, we can discuss the meaning of it for quite a long time. How, for instance, would you suggest the theme of secrecy should operate in the interpretation of the story? (Remember the theme that the parables prolong the "secrecy" of Jesus' teaching - cf Mk 4:10-12). Notice that there is no explanation of our parable given in the Gospel, It is delivered – so far as we are able to judge – as Jesus delivered it. It is thus in keeping with the tradition of Jewish parable, and the meaning lies hidden in its hearers.

Now let us look at another kind of story: the allegory. It seems to me to be quite certain that allegory was a form easily found in Jewish literature, and therefore quite possibly something Jesus might have used for himself. There is a magnificent allegory in the history of David.

^B **2 Samuel 12:1** Yahweh sent the prophet Nathan to David.
He came to him and said: In the same town were two men, one rich, the other poor.
² The rich man had flocks and herds in great abundance;
³ the poor man had nothing but a ewe lamb, only a single little one which he had bought.
He fostered it and it grew up with him and his children, eating his bread, drinking from his cup, sleeping in his arms; it was like a daughter to him.
⁴ When a traveller came to stay, the rich man would not take anything from his own flock or herd to provide for the wayfarer who had come to him.

Instead, he stole the poor man's lamb and prepared that for his guest.

⁵ David flew into a great rage with the man.

'As Yahweh lives,' he said to Nathan 'the man who did this deserves to die.

⁶ For doing such a thing and for having shown no pity,
he shall make fourfold restitution for the lamb.'

⁷ Nathan then said to David, 'You are the man!

The story is longer and far more complex than Jesus' parable. But notice how the impulse that leads the king to judge is similarly applied. It works perfectly, and David, apparently unknowingly, passes judgment on himself for taking the wife of Uriah, a deed which led him treacherously to murder one of his closest friends, a man whose trust in the King deserved untainted loyalty. The prophet follows through with an exact exegesis

Yahweh, God of Israel, says this,

"I anointed you king of Israel, I saved you from Saul's clutches,

⁸ I gave you your master's household and your master's wives into your arms,

I gave you the House of Israel and the House of Judah;

and, if this is still too little, I shall give you other things as well.

⁹ Why did you show contempt for Yahweh, by doing what displeases him?

You put Uriah the Hittite to the sword,

you took his wife to be your wife,

causing his death by the sword of the Ammonites.

¹⁰ For this, your household will never be free of the sword,

since you showed contempt for me

and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite, to make her your wife."

The heartless cruelty to which David descended because of his lust and the shame it brought upon him is judged by the king himself. When heartless cruelty is described to him, he speaks of the death penalty. The prophet uses the king's own sense of justice against him. It is a good example of the way in which a story, instead of a full frontal attack, can be used to illuminate the unequal state of a human mind and heart. The moment of dénouement has such power precisely because it is the guilty king who voices it.

Jesus used an ancient allegory from Isaiah 5 (the song of the vineyard). In it Israel (the vineyard) yields only sour grapes; so the owner (God) decides to demolish what he had built there, and let the forces of nature repossess it. Jesus takes up the story in Mt 21:

³³ 'Listen to another parable.

There was a man, a landowner, who planted a vineyard; he fenced it round, dug a winepress in it and built a tower; then he leased it to tenants and went abroad.

³⁴ When vintage time drew near he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his produce.

³⁵ But the tenants seized his servants, thrashed one, killed another and stoned a third.

³⁶ Next he sent some more servants, this time a larger number,
and they dealt with them in the same way.

³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them thinking, "They will respect my son."

³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir.

Come on, let us kill him and take over his inheritance."

³⁹ So they seized him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?'

⁴¹ They answered, 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end
and lease the vineyard to other tenants

who will deliver the produce to him at the proper time.'

⁴² Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing and we marvel at it?'

⁴³ 'I tell you, then, that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.'

⁴⁵ When they heard his parables,
the chief priests and the scribes realised he was speaking about them,
⁴⁶ but though they would have liked to arrest him
they were afraid of the crowds, who looked on him as a prophet.

The line *they realised he was speaking about them* – following on their passing of judgment on the wicked tenants – puts this use of allegory into the same tradition of bringing forth judgment by making people listen to a story. The obliquity of the method is what gives it its appeal and its power.

We read these stories of the Lord, and we acknowledge their great skill and effectiveness. We can hardly suppose that there was a watertight obedience to his *ipsissima verba*⁵. It is entirely unlikely that Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son, for instance, exactly as we have it in Lk 15. After all, we are in the hands of the finest writer of Biblical Greek the Scripture has to show us, and so fine a story-line sounds much more like the product of a learned scribe than a street preacher. It is also Luke who gives us the canticles we use every day in the Divine Office. Anyone suggesting that the *Magnificat* is actually the text of the words spoken by Mary at her encounter with Elizabeth would have to suppose that Zechariah was already parked in the front hall with his writing-tablet, rapidly taking down on our behalf the middle of the *Hail, Mary* and the *Magnificat* as they fell from the lips of his wife and of the Blessed Virgin. Such polished literature as the story of the Prodigal Son is obviously the work of a writing man. That may also account for the fact that it is allegorical rather than parabolic. In this it contrasts sharply with the real parables, which are just as short and spontaneous – and as liable to provoke controversy – as their original form would require. *The parable of the two sons*, where the father asks them both to go to the vineyard, may lie nearer to the source of the great story: one says he will go, but doesn't; the other says he will not go, and does. The evangelist – and probably not Jesus – asks, *which of the two did the Father's will?* There is, of course, only one answer: but that's why the Lord probably didn't ask. He would leave that to his hearers.

When we come to the vexed question of the story of Jesus himself, there is an obvious, looming question about the exactitude of the Gospel story. Particularly in the Passion account, we have to ask whether the telling of the truth in blunt historical terms has not given way to an obedience to scriptural sources. How much of the Passion narrative is actually a citation of Ps 22, Isaiah 52-53 and the like? Did the Chief Priests artlessly fix the pay for Judas at the price mentioned by Ex 21:32 (30 shekels) for the life of a slave? Matthew says so; but Matthew is good at citing scripture. Mk simply says they gave him money, and Luke agrees with Mark. John says nothing about any monetary arrangement: Judas' betrayal is not depicted as paid for by the priests. But there are complex narratives at play in the Passion Narrative (see Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol 1 on the question of blood-money). Origen and Ambrose refer to the price paid to make Joseph a slave, there is ironic talk of thirty pieces of silver in Zechariah and Jeremiah. The theme of the hands of a man (Judas) being soiled with *innocent blood* leads to Judas throwing down the coins in the Temple and hanging himself, to Pilate's washing his hands, and to the cry *His blood be upon us and on our children*, which has been used down the ages as the excuse for anti-Semitic pogroms.

⁵ As I explained in an earlier lecture, the way in which this allegory is unveiled does scant justice to it as it stands. The extension of the parable to include the fate of the king's son (*they will respect my son*) may well be editorial rather than Jesuanic. If it came from the Lord, one would expect the conclusion of the allegory (that the king would come to punish the murderers) would have to be replaced: God does not return with vengeance for the death of Jesus, but raises him to life to bring them an eternal share in the divine life: in other words, in the terms of the story, he gives them as a gift what they wanted to steal by murder. Matthew may see in the downfall of Jerusalem the punishment for the Crucifixion; this is made nearly certain by Mt 22:7. That Jesus saw things in these terms is at least an unproven allegation.

