

GENESIS

The Sagas

We have very little contact today with sagas, having become a society which forgets its stories and disparages them as unhistorical and therefore untrue.

It is worth establishing a point at the beginning of the lecture which we have already treated frequently elsewhere: that if we are to confine our notion of truth to the *historical*, the future for religion - ours or any other - is practically nil. For religion to flourish it is essential that the human mind should be liberated from the nineteenth/twentieth centuries' distressing strait-jacket of grovelling respect for material realities and historically datable facts. Some facts, indeed those which are most influential - and therefore the most real - are not of this kind at all; we eliminate them from our considerations at enormous peril to our mental and intellectual balance, quite apart from the spiritual considerations.

Religion has to accept and treasure a view of reality which transcends narrow limitations; the mind of God is greater than the greatest human mind, and therefore the human mind must transcend its own intellectual categories in order to enter into religious experience.

It is important, however, that we do not remove from the saga its foundation; the saga is always rooted in the historical experience of the nation that gives rise to it. The saga is therefore a serious account of truth that *is* historical, even if it does not obey what we call the rules of modern historical accounting. These are not fairy-stories. They demand in their own way to be *believed*. As we have been saying fairly consistently within our Biblical course, the *literary* rules govern the way in which each Biblical document demands to be believed. Get the rules of the Scripture wrong, in other words, and your faith will to that extent be misguided and misplaced, possibly dangerously so. What are the rules for reading a saga? Schlegel says

Saga comprises the sum total of the living historical recollection of peoples. In it is mirrored in fact and truth the history of a people. It is the form in which a people thinks of its own history.

Some points made by von Rad (*Genesis*, p32ff).

When sagas are being born, the power of rational and logical historical perception is not yet fully liberated in the people - and therefore the powers of instinctive, intuitively interpretative, one could almost say *mantic*, understanding dominate all the more freely.

Saga is a view and interpretation not only of that which once was, but of a past event that is secretly present and decisive for the present. In some deep recess of the mind that produces it, saga knows that the story it tells is in fact contemporary. This is something much more powerful than anything conditioning what we now call historical writing.

In this, we could say that the saga as a piece of narrative is what grounds the cult as a piece of ritual behaviour. The saga of the Exodus provides the verbal expression for the feast of Passover, just as the Institution narrative provides the indispensable ground for the Mass. If the saga is inaccessible, the cult becomes impossible. This may give special insight about the way in which we search the historical records in vain for evidence of (say) the Exodus; but in the Exodus account lies hidden in saga form the whole motivation and quality we might say the *quiddity* - of a millennial people. The Passover has been re-experienced by every Hebrew generation in a way that does not belong to historical memory alone. The Last Supper as an historical fact could not be expected to figure in any chronicle of its day, but it has become the forming pattern of a Christian people and of countless individual lives: how and why? *Because of its function as a cultic saga.*

Despite the high intent of such sagas, we find a quality which sets them apart from their parallels in other cultures, and in which we shall detect an answering quality in the historical chronicles of Israel: that the process of enshrining defining events from the nation's past is devoid of any tendency to idealize. The Yahwist, one of whose qualities we have seen as an earthy realism about the nature and intervention of God in relation to humanity, does not scruple to present the heroes of Israel's past in clearly human terms, warts and all. In spite of their closeness to God, they remain irrefragably weak, and sinful. Von Rad thinks this fact betrays that their principal purpose is to present God, not to concentrate on the men. He asks whether Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are ever presented as models for people's imitation in later generations: certainly we can affirm that this is not the prime intention of the sagas, as it is not the prime intention of the Bible: these stories are simply not moral tales.

(One might alternatively comment that the effect of the refusal to transfigure humanity in the sagas is to anchor the experience of God firmly among real, as opposed to idealized, people. This tradition bears fruit right into the period of the Gospels. The somewhat strained ability of someone like Augustine to *justify* apparent moral fallibility thus becomes colourable: for example, Augustine believed that the patriarch Jacob's deception of his father Isaac, far from representing an extremely shady piece of Hebrew cunning, represented a deep obedience to the will of God which transcends human categories; so he invests the word *guile* - Latine *mendacium* - with the noble meanings of *sacramentum* and *mysterium*; most modern people would find this a bold, not to say unnecessary, interpretation.)

Another of von Rad's comments is very perceptive: that the Yahwist reveals himself, not by interfering with the actual form of his story-material (we should have expected a much smoother consistency in Genesis if he had) but by the way he has arranged the stories in sequence, and the links he has made between them. The presence of the primeval history in the Yahwistic account is a case in point. It makes a huge difference from the Elohist view that it should be incorporated, and prepares the way for the Priestly account of Creation which in the end forms chapter 1 of Genesis. A short meditation on what the Bible would be like without this inclusion should be sufficient to establish the cardinal importance of the editing choices of the Yahwist.