Scripture

THE QUARTERLY OF THE CATHOLIC BIBLICAL ASSOCIATION

VOLUME XVIII JULY 1966 No 43

THE TRUTH OF GENESIS 1–11

I thought of giving this paper[1] the subtitle 'The problem of historicity'. That is, more or less what it is going to be about. My only hesitation, though, is over the word 'problem'; I think it often only bedevils our attempt to understand the bible, if we think of the exercise in terms of problem and solution. There are really scarcely any problems—and there are certainly no solutions. What there is, is a whole strange, mysterious world, big with the mysteriousness of God's revelation; an infinitely mysterious realm to be explored, inexhaustible meanings to be discovered and recognized; and of course a host of misunderstandings to be avoided.

So I prefer to invite you to explore with me the mystery of the truth of these first chapters of Genesis. We start—at least I as a believer start—with an assumption which I am not going to try and justify now; it is that the whole bible, including these chapters, is true, because it is inspired by the Spirit of God, it is the saving word of God to men, and God does not utter lies, or untruth, or mistakes, or deceit. I won't try to justify this assumption, but I will make one point about it—about what sort of assumption it is. I am not making it as a kind of theoretical axiom or initial hypothesis. It is what you might call an existential *a priori*. On the comparison I am suggesting with a voyage of geographical exploration, it is rather like the assumption which the explorer of the River Nile makes that the River Nile is there. If it wasn't, he wouldn't want to explore it. If the bible were not for me a divinely true book, I would not be wanting as a Christian to explore it. Of course, just as the explorer, as a man of science, proceeds also on certain theoretical scientific assumptions of geography, e.g., that rivers do not flow uphill, so do I too make some theoretical assumptions, I adopt some axioms. The basic one is that God's revealed truth cannot contradict or be contradicted by truth as ascertained by man's rational enquiry, by truth in our particular case, as established by science or history.

Long ago St. Augustine had some wise things to say on this topic in a commentary he wrote on Genesis 1–3. He reserved his severest

[1] A paper given to the Catholic Society at Hull University 25th January, 1966.

observations for those keen but foolish Christians who make pseudo-scientific or pseudo-historical assertions on the strength of scripture, which the learned pagan historian or scientist knows to be false. And the lesson he draws is that in interpreting scripture one must walk very delicately indeed, and avoid making any but the most tentative affirmations. His commentary in fact is little more than a string of involved subtle questions and tentative suppositions; which makes it very difficult, but at the same time very salutary reading.

So then, our basic existential assumption—'the Nile is there'—leads straight into a string of questions. These chapters are true. But how? In what way? As moral teaching merely, or as allegory? Or as science, or straight history? It is all true. But what does it all mean? God is speaking to us here. But what exactly is God saying to us?

A first answer to this last question is that God is saying to us what the human author He inspired is saying to us. But what exactly is that? If we want to understand the human author's message, we naturally ask further questions. Who was he? When was he writing? What kind of book was he intending to write? The only direct evidence, practically speaking, which we have to go on in order to find answers to these questions, is the biblical texts themselves. There are, to be sure, various kinds of indirect evidence available which throw light of many different colours on these texts; for example, ecclesiastical and rabbinic Jewish traditions, extra-biblical history and texts, archaeological information. But the evidence these sources provide *is* indirect, and hard to assess; never more so indeed than when it purports to testify directly in answer to our questions, as when the rabbinic tradition, taken over by the Christian tradition, and indeed incorporated in the N.T., when this tradition tells us that the author of the Law, i.e., of the first five books of the bible, Genesis to Deuteronomy, often also called the pentateuch, is Moses. Is this ancient tradition direct evidence that Moses did write it all? Not in the least. It is only evidence for what one might call the correlative value which the rabbis put both on *Moses*, as the first and greatest prophet of God and legislator, and on the *Law*, or pentateuch as the divine word to Israel. This rabbinic, N.T., ecclesiastical assessment of both Moses and Genesis and the other books of the Law is in the highest degree authoritative. I accept it, as a believer. A modern way of stating it would be to say that God's revelation, His teaching, His law contained in the five books of the law, that all this is most aptly represented by the person of Moses; he is the symbol, the prime human instrument, the patron saint of this law. And so it can aptly

be called the law of Moses, and Moses can be poetically called its author. But this does not mean that this rabbinic tradition really asserts that Moses wrote the pentateuch in the same way as Scott wrote the Waverley novels. It may *appear* to assert this, but appearances are frequently deceptive.

For direct evidence we must look at the texts; and so the first professional man we must call in to help us in the exploration is the literary critic. The results of about 150 years of minute textual and literary criticism of the pentateuch—most of it in the last 80 years or so—conducted with a view to answering these questions, is very briefly as follows:—

1. We had really better discard any notion of authorship as we understand it today. The pentateuch, the law of Moses is a highly complex collection of texts which *grew* (like a compost heap), and was chopped about, and changed, and added to, and subtracted from, and in general edited and re-edited, over several centuries. Many of the component parts had a long oral history before they were ever written down.

2. Therefore, we do not so much analyse the whole into the work of different authors, as into different types or strands of text. For the whole of the pentateuch the classical higher criticism has analysed four main kinds of text. Only two are involved in Genesis I–II, so I will only trouble you with them. They are known by the initials P and J. P stands for *Priesterkodex*, the priestly code (nearly all the higher critics were German). J stands for the Yahwist source, in which the name used for God is Yahweh (it figures in our bibles as the LORD), and it is called J, because the Germans spell Yahweh with a J. Roughly speaking, in Genesis 1–11, chap. 1, the genealogies of 5, 10, and 11, and one element of the flood story of 6–9, are ascribed to P, the rest to J.

3. The date to which P is generally agreed to belong, as we have it now, incorporated in the text, is the time of the Babylonian exile, 6th cent. B.C.; the date generally assigned to the composition or compilation of J is the era of David and Solomon, 10th cent. B.C.

4. Though P and J stand for types of texts, and not for authors in the simple modern sense, it is nonetheless convenient to personify them as authors. There must, after all, have been human minds at work. But let us remember that we *are* personifying these types of text; that particularly in the case of P an indefinite number of hands are probably involved; that even though J is more likely to be predominantly the work of a single genius (whom we may just possibly, highly-tentatively, be able to identify with David's chief secretary of

state, called variously Sheraiah, Shisha, Shusha, or Shewa, 1 Sam. 8, 17; 1 Kgs. 4, 3; 1 Chr. 18, 16), even so the work of this man consisted much more in the selection, arrangement, and editing of older sources than in original composition.

So much for the answers to the questions 'Who wrote it?' and 'When?'. Needless to say, in line with St. Augustine's wise advice, these answers must always be regarded as more or less tentative and hypothetical. Now for the most important of these preliminary questions which we put to the literary critic: What sort of book, what kind of literature were the authors of these texts intending to compose?

Let us start with J, the earlier of the two. J is a first class story teller; in the chapters that concern us he tells the stories of paradise, Adam and Eve and the serpent, i.e., the fall; of Cain and Abel, of Noah and the flood, of the tower of Babel. But of course, we can only begin to understand what he meant by these stories if we first realise that they are just the prologue to a much larger work. J, according to the common consent of most scholars, was the composer of a national historical prose epic—of which only large fragments still survive in our actual bibles. He was an Israelite combination of Livy and Virgil, or Homer and Herodotus. The theme of his epic, though, was essentially religious or theological—there was a bit of the Dante or the Milton about him too; it was the theme of how Yahweh, the Lord, chose Israel among all the peoples of the earth; how He made promises to the national ancestors, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and how He redeemed those promises by redeeming His people from Egypt, settling them in the promised land of Canaan, and finally by choosing David out of all Israel to be His anointed representative, His son, the shepherd of His people Israel. (Remember, it is just possible that J was David's secretary of state). David was the elect of God to save Israel; Israel was the elect of God to save, or bring a blessing on, all the nations of the earth. So J's historical epic is an epic of salvation history, of election and redemption. Humanly speaking he may be called the inventor of salvation history, of what the best people call *heilsgeschichte*, as a literary form.

This is where we come to the problem, if we choose to look at the matter as a problem. So far we have had to make no judgments about truth. We have asked questions, and the professional literary critics have given us certain provisional answers. Accepting what the experts have to say—with that measure of canny reserve one should always show towards the pronouncements of experts—we find that the J texts constitute large fragments of what was composed

by J in the 10th cent. B.C. as a historical epic on a religious theme. But as soon as a text is declared to be historical, in the sense that its author or authors intended it as a historical account of events, then it is subject to the historian's judgment ; is it true and reliable or is it not ? What then is an impartial trained historian likely to say when presented with our fragments of the J epic ? This historian is the second professional consultant we call in, after the literary critic, who was the first.

A historical epic written in the 10th cent. B.C. Well, it is first class historical evidence for the 10th cent. B.C. Our historian will have no difficulty in accepting as a true account of events those parts of it which relate to that period ; for example, the narrative describing how King Solomon succeeded to the throne of David, which we find in I K 1–2, and which many scholars regard as a J text. But as for narratives concerning earlier events : " Well ", he would say, " they are doubtless evidence for what J thought had happened, but taken in themselves they become less and less reliable evidence for what actually did happen the further back we go. J of course, in composing his national theological epic about the history of his people, will have made use of the sources available to him, stories and traditions of various kinds. They are of various kinds, too. The stories about the patriarchs, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, I would put in the category of folklore. Now folklore undoubtedly has value as historical evidence ; it is very rarely mere fiction or falsification ; but it can never be simply taken at its face value as descriptive of events. The story tellers tell their tales with purposes in view that are not those of the modern historian, concerned only with *facts*, with the truth of events. They won't spoil a good story for a ha'porth of mere facts, or fail to point the moral they have in mind, even if it means adjusting the story to the moral—which isn't of course by any means always or even mostly, a moral moral. The older stories still, which you are concerned with in Genesis 1–11 (it is still our impartial historian speaking) I would put in the categories of legend—e.g., the tower of Babel and the flood—and of myth or quasi-myth—e.g., the story of paradise and the fall, and Cain and Abel. By legend I mean tales that have a residual historical content, as having been inspired by some extraordinary event ; and by myth I mean tales that have no historical value at all, because they are expressions of some religious or psychological meaning which are cast in symbolical narrative form. I classify these tales in Genesis 1–11 as myth and legend (for goodness sake, by the way, don't treat the words myth, legend, tale, or story as merely synonymous with untrue), because they have many striking

affinities with the myths and legends of other ancient cultures, in particular those of Mesopotamia and more remotely those of Greece. I have a certain hesitation, however, about the myth classification, and call it quasi-myth, because there are even more striking differences between these biblical tales and corresponding pagan ones. The pagan myths are tales about gods and demigods for the most part, and they tend to have no time context at all. The biblical stories by contrast are about human beings, and the dealings of the one Lord God with them, and they are put in a very definite time context or chronological sequence. This is very probably the work of J himself, putting a chronological pattern or form on his legendary and mythical source material, and it is extremely interesting and significant to find an ancient writer doing this to his sources. But of course it doesn't make those sources any more true as objective descriptive history ; and to put it quite bluntly, I am bound to say that the value of the story of Adam and Eve as objective descriptive history (and that is the only value I as a historian am concerned with) is nil."

Thus speaks our impartial modern historian. And he faces us with a problem in our exploration. The object of that exploration, our particular river Nile, namely the divine God-revealed, God-revealing truth of Genesis 1–11 is still there ; the historian has not dissolved it as a fantasy with a wave of his historical wand. But he has perhaps dissolved some of our presuppositions and expectations of what we are likely to find. And he has also given us some useful guide lines for further exploration.

On the negative side : we will not find in the tales of Genesis 1–11 the kind of objective description of events which we normally assume without question is what history is meant to give us, and which the modern historian tries to reconstruct from a wide range of evidence, if his sources do not hand it to him on a plate ; particularly, in the case of ancient history and prehistory, from archaeological evidence. It is this kind of objective description of events which a modern historian calls historical truth. The ancient tales do not convey such historical truth. But this does not mean that they convey historical falsehood. This would only be the case if they *purported*, in the intentions of their narrators, to be objective descriptions. But to classify them as legend or quasi-myth is precisely to suppose that they had no such purport or intention. For the modern historian, therefore, they are only indirect evidence to the remote past, rather like the archaeological evidence provided by flints and pottery and so forth, which are neither true nor false, but simply are. By inference from them the historian can make tentative statements which can be judged as

historically true or false, probable or improbable. But these judgments do not qualify the evidence itself on which the statements are based. So in effect the historian has removed the tales of Genesis 1–11 from his field of judgment altogether ; he has *removed*, not solved, the problem for us.

But this leaves me, as the explorer of the divine truth of these tales, unsatisfied. For remember, we turned to the historian for his judgment *after* establishing that J *was* purporting to compose a historical epic. And the historian himself has remarked that J imposed on his quasi-mythical and legendary material a chronological, that is to say a historical time sequence. His material in itself, in isolation, may escape the historian's judgment all right, being in itself in isolation quasi-myth and legend. But J himself seems to have passed a historical judgment on it by asserting it as history, which he did by *in*serting it into a historical time sequence ; and his assertion cannot, surely, escape the modern historian's judgment.

So on the positive side, we are driven by the modern historian's analysis of J, to proceed in our exploration by investigating more closely what J's intentions really were, by trying to put ourselves into his shoes, into his mind, in the Israel of David and Solomon, in the 10th cent. B.C. I have already suggested that he was the literary inventor of the literary form of salvation history. But neither his idea of history nor his interest in it will be the same as the modern historian's. He is not primarily concerned with the objective description of events. To achieve such a description, except for the events of his own time, he has in any case infinitely fewer resources and techniques than the modern historian at his disposal. What he is interested in, and what his idea of history urges him to explore is the divine meaning, the intelligible pattern of human affairs in time. For him time has meaning, because his Israelite faith tells him that it is controlled by the God of Israel who conducts the destinies of men in time. If time has meaning, then it has a beginning, an ordered course, an end, an Alpha and an Omega. In this view of time, based on faith in God's revelation to Israel, J differs *toto caelo* from his pagan Mesopotamian and Egyptian contemporaries, for whom time is really an infinite sea of meaninglessness, in which human existence is governed by a kind of circular motion, evidenced and symbolised by the seasonal cycles of the year and of the stars. It is to this cyclical pattern of existence, the ' wheel of time', that the ancient myths are related. Such a view of human existence, in its purity, essentially involves a denial of history. J superimposes on this cyclical pattern (which Israel did not simply reject, since it represents a valid element

of human experience) a progressive linear motion, which is essentially an assertion of history.

Now Israel as a nation had a definite history, divinely governed, which began with Moses and the exodus, and reached its climax, for J, in the establishment of the kingdom of David. (For us, of course, this was no more than a first act climax, typifying in advance the supreme climax to come in the establishment of the universal kingdom of the Messiah, the son of David). But to elucidate the force and meaning of Israelite history from Moses to David it was necessary to go back behind Moses to the patriarchal ancestors. For in effect the pattern J perceived in history was that the Moses-to-David course of events marked the *fulfilment of promises* made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ; it marked, in other terms, the vindication of God's *choice* and *call* of these ancestors. Election, vocation, promise, fulfilment—these are the revealed, theological categories in terms of which J finds meaning in history. So back we go to Abraham, necessarily incorporating a selection of the current folklore tales about the patriarchs, and arranging them in a time sequence which is of necessity artificial, a construction of J's theological and artistic sense, because he has no means at his disposal for establishing an accurately objective chronology. However, his chronology is not therefore false, even though it is not one which a modern historian would be interested in. It is what we might provisionally call, for want of a better term, a symbolic chronology, designed to bring out the development of these vital themes of election, call, and promise ; and as such, in its own terms, it is true.

But J could not stop, or rather start, with Abraham. In the first place Abraham was not the beginning ; he had a context, he came from a background. In the second place he was chosen *out of* the mass of mankind, and he was chosen *for the sake of* the mass of mankind—'In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.' He was chosen to begin a divine process of salvation and redemption. What from ? From sin and its consequences, from a state of alienation from the truth and the life of God. So to bring out the full meaning or sense of divine *election* and *promise*, the development of which are given us in the folklore tales of the patriarchs with their 'symbolic chronology,' J has to go behind Abraham and sketch the development of sin, of man's progressive alientation from God. His salvation history required a prologue of what we might call unsalvation or corruption history. His material for this is no longer fairly straightforward folklore about the ancestors ; it is a mass of myth and legend which Israel shared with and derived from neighbouring peoples. On this matter

again, by selection, rewriting and arrangement, J imposes a symbolic time sequence which illustrates and typifies man's progressive alienation from God. He takes certain narratives which in themselves are powerfully typical of certain recurrent human situations, and treats them as *archi*typical, as the first of such situations. With his sense of the linear pattern of history, he says to himself, 'There must have been a first time.' Thus the last word in man's alienation, his arrogant defiance of God. The tower of Babel (compare the Greek myth of the Titans' assault on Olympus by piling Pelion on Ossa) is treated as the architype, the first time. This follows an architypical instance of divine vengeance overtaking human wickedness, and also of divine mercy saving a just remnant—Noah and the flood. And so we go back to the architypical bloodshedding and fratricide, a story surely paralleled in myths and legends from all over the world—compare Romulus and Remus ; it is treated as the first instance of a man shedding his brother's blood—all men are brothers, and it is economically assigned to the first pair of brothers. And finally, this first sin of man against man is seen as following, and implicitly issuing from a primordial disobedience of man towards God. This is the ultimate beginning of the sin sequence. But J's Israelite faith in the goodness of God does not allow him to set evil at the very beginning of things ; and so the beginning of this corruption history has a wider setting in the goodness of God's creation, and the paradisal beauty of the basic divine intentions for man, given us in the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, and their establishment in paradise in Genesis 2.

That J's time sequence, and indeed the content of his stories is meant to be regarded as symbolical and not as objectively descriptive is borne out by the names of his characters. To take only one case, the name Adam is not really a proper name at all ; it is just the Hebrew for man with a capital M. On the other hand, we must affirm and stand by J's intention to convert these timeless myths and legends into history. Man has a divinely governed history—a sin history and a saving history—in which things significantly happened. Nobody knows, there are no records, *how* they happened or what happened for the most part. But we do know, J knew, by God's revelation their sense and significance. And so he writes a history in which he says in effect 'Things must have happened something like this.' I would stress the importance of that 'something like.' That is what I mean by suggesting that J, having no evidence on which to write an objectively descriptive history, which describes what happened and how, took non-historical or barely historical material from myths and legends to construct out of them a divinely inspired symbolic

history. To do this, and make clear he was doing it, he had to cast his material into a symbolic time sequence or chronology, which thus presents the *drama* of God's historical saving revelation to man.

J's early narratives, then, are indeed history ; they are true history. But they are not the descriptive history of the modern historian, nor do they employ the modern historian's objective chronology. They are not, therefore, descriptively or chronologically, in the strict sense, either true or false. They are, for want of a better word, symbolic history, with a symbolic chronology, and as such they are true.

So much—too much, you may think—for J. We can deal with P much more briefly, as the same general principles we have been setting up will apply. Four hundred years after J, in the 6th cent. B.C., during the exile in Babylon, the J text no longer survived in its integrity. History had not stood still since J, so his view of it was inevitably, in many ways outmoded. But he still provided the kernel of Israel's salvation history. His inspired view of divine salvation and revelation as being manifested in a history governed by divine election, call, promise and fulfilment remained a for ever inalienable legacy among God's people.

For P however, representing the exiled Jerusalem priests in Babylon, J did not go far enough. For one thing his symbolic time sequence was much too sketchy to satisfy meticulous scholars. P had available other materials which enabled him to set out a detailed chronology by means of those genealogies so dear to ancient peoples. These he incorporated in Genesis 5, and 10 and 11. But remember, they should not be read as though they were meant to be accurately descriptive. Again, to use that inadequate word, they are symbolic genealogies—though what they are symbolic of, apart from the basic historicalness of the human race, I certainly don't know, and I doubt if P did either. For me, however, they receive their mysterious but satisfying fulfilment and justification in the genealogy of Jesus Christ given by St. Luke.

Then again, and this is much more important than the genealogies, J did not go back to the *ne plus ultra* beginning, in a way to satisfy P. A priest of the ruined temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, an exile among the magnificent pagan temples of Marduk and Ishtar and Bel and all the rest of them in Babylon, he had to assert for his own sake and his fellow exiles' sake, Israel's uncompromising monotheism ; that there is but one God, and he is Yahweh the Lord, the God of Israel this utterly defeated, almost extirpated people ; Who clearly does not dwell in temples made with hands, for the whole world is His and all that is in it, including Babylon and its gods and temples. To assert

this, it was not within P's cultural range of vision to write an apologetics treatise *De Deo Uno*—nor would any one have understood it if he had done such a thing. He made his assertion far more effectively by editing the old history, still mainly J in its composition, which reaffirmed Israel's unique election by her God ; and by prefacing it with a narrative of his own composition about how this God of Israel made the world. Creation means dominion ; he who made the world is clearly lord of the world. J had told how the Lord God had given dominion to man, to the first man Adam ; P tells how God had that dominion to give.

He had a model for his creation narrative—the Babylonian creation myth, which was recited annually at the Babylonian new year festival. This tells how Marduk, the chief deity in the pantheon, acquired his dominion by a cosmic war among the gods. This war was fought before time was. This is how that myth begins:—

> When on high the heaven had not been named,
> Firm ground below had not been called by name,
> Naught but primordial Apsu their begetter,
> And Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
> Their waters commingling as a single body. . . .

That is the ' when ' of the mythical drama, a timeless when, having no measurable co-ordination with the present ' when ' of our existence, because it does not profess to be history. Apsu and Mummu-Tiamat figure in Genesis I as the waters above the firmament, and the deep, or the abyss, the waters below the firmament, the original Chaos of the old Greek myths.

As a deliberate counter to this timeless ' when,' P starts with ' In the beginning God created heaven and earth.' That is how he acquired his dominion over them, and that is how history, the intelligible pattern of salvation, of God's relationship to what is not God, to creatures, began ; in a beginning, that *is* in principle measurably co-ordinate with our present ' when.' Time is the meaningful measure of all created being. Timelessness, infinity, eternity, belong only to God's uncreated being, and cannot be a context for mythical events.

Then God's act of creation is set out serially in the six days of creation, with God resting on the seventh day. One inspiration of this pattern is obvious. By the time of the exile the observance of the sabbath was the crucial mark of the faithful Israelite. P sees this Mosaic observance as a kind of sacramental declaration of the sacred meaningfulness of time, of salvation history. So he writes it into his statement of the beginning of that sacred salvation history. At any rate, there is no doubt he is quite deliberately *historicizing* the divine act of creation, for he concludes his account with the words, surely rather artificial,

'These are the *generations* of the heavens and the earth' (2,4). 'Generations' is an odd word to use, but by it he links this creation narrative with the *generations* of mankind he will shortly be listing in his genealogies, which measurably link human origins with the present day.

Another possible literary inspiration, combined with this sabbath pattern fitted onto a 'counter-creation-myth,' may have been a Babylonian twelve stage temple building ritual. P would thus be presenting the creation of the world as God building his own temple, and finally creating man to serve as its priest, and also as God's image (idol) in the innermost sanctuary of the temple, the sacred garden. But the important thing is that he is writing of creation as *history;* not indeed as *descriptive* history—how could anybody possibly be in a position to *describe* creation ?—and so he is of no interest to the modern scientific student of world origins or cosmogony, and does not fall under his judgment. He is writing of it, in order to counter the pagan myth, as a symbolic history, with a symbolic time structure ; and this is a case where the symbolism of the seven day time structure is pretty transparent. He is above all asserting that there was a definite and absolute beginning of the visible world—and that God was in control of, and therefore transcends, even that beginning. *A fortiori* he controls the course of the world in time.

If we had the simplicity of babes, undistorted by the sophistication of science's and history's categories of thought, we could read these extraordinary chapters simply as what they are ; mysterious God inspired stories revealing to us the first acts of the drama of God's saving will for men. Because we do not, however, have this simplicity, these sophisticated contortions are necessary, if we are to savour and to vindicate the divine truth of these first chapters of scripture. That they are true, that is my Christian faith ; that their truth is vindicated in the manner I have set forth—that is only my tentative, hypothetical theological gropings, and I would be delighted if you could do it more simply and convincingly.

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