How Historical is Genesis 1-11?

Edmund Hill O.P.

The question arises, because Christian tradition has always assumed that these chapters are as historical as any of the historical books of the bible. For most of its course tradition has assumed this in a rather naive, quasi-fundamentalist way. The naivety of fundamentalism or literalism, is no longer intellectually possible in the light of modern historical, archaeological, palaeontological and literary criticism. But does this formidable array of criticism compel us to abandon the traditional assumption altogether?

I think not. Theologically we are still committed, not merely by the decisions of the Roman Biblical Commission, of which the latest (that I know of) and most genial is the letter to Cardinal Suhard of Paris, 16th Jan. 1948, but by the whole weight of theological tradition and the most up-to-date biblical hermeneutics (e.g. that of von Rad), to maintaining that these chapters are historical in some way or another: but it will be in a very peculiar way which the modern professional historian will not easily recognise as historical.

Rahner makes a distinction between historical in *form* and historical in *content*.[1] It is a useful distinction to start from. To illustrate: a narrative which is historical in content but not in form would be Nathan's parable to David, 2 Sam. 12. Its content in fact describes what David had done, but in form it was a kind of parable. It was history disguised as fiction. A narrative that is historical in form but not in content would be something like a historical novel—fiction disguised as history.

The distinction, however, cannot be applied to Gen. 1-11 without some refinement. The secular historian, faced with these chapters, is surely bound to say, "I cannot accept them as historical evidence, however remote, of the events narrated in them. However (he might concede), they are of historical interest for their own sakes, as evidence, still obscure, of what their authors believed. And they do have affinities with a number of Sumerian and Akkadian narratives which are not historical, but are either cultic myths, like the creation myth, or epic legends/sagas with a strong mythical colouring, like the Gilgamesh epic with its stories of the flood, and of a kind of fall, and of a quest for the elixir of life.

1 'Monogenism and the Scriptures', *Theological Investigations* I, p. 23, n. 1.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1977.tb02363.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

You could also compare a number of Greek myths and legends; the Titans assaulting Olympus, for example, to the giants of Gen. 6 and the tower of Babel of Gen. 11."

So with the aid of our secular historian we might make a first, provisional, working affirmation: that the Genesis stories derive ultimately from a substratum of Sumerian myth and legend, of which more direct representatives are the Akkadian myths and epics, and of which much Greek mythology is also a collateral descendant. And in this kind of literature we must distinguish (at the very least) between *myth* properly so called, and *legend*, which is also often called *saga*. The former in no way purports to be historical. It is religious reflection, in terms of symbolic drama on recurring vital human situations and realities, sex, birth, death, conflict, summer and winter etc. As for the latter, it is not as a rule a mere exercise in fiction for entertainment's or edification's sake. It usually fabricates stories out of ancient memories of events, without suffering the stories to be strictly controlled by the events as a purely historical narrative should be. Thus legends readily lend themselves, from all sorts of motives, to mythical elaboration. I think a good illustration of the technique of the saga or legend is provided by T. Mofolo's great story about Chaka.[2] Thus ancient legends can be a useful source to the modern secular historian, provided he interprets them with care.

What one has to realise is that the tellers of legends or sagas are not particularly interested in history as a definite description and chronology of events or persons, but rather in some symbolic significance which they see in such events or persons. So their descriptions easily get mythified (Chaka's encounter with the great dragon in the pool, for example) and their chronology becomes vague or timeless, as with the Sumerian kings before the flood, who reigned for periods like 28,800 years.[3]

But now let us compare Genesis 1-11 with appropriate analogues, and first of all Gen. 1 with the Babylonian creation myth, which is patently timeless and non-historical: "When on high the heaven had not been named, firm ground 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. . . ."[4] So it begins. From this primordial couple are

2 A prose epic about the great Zulu king, written in Sesotho about 1900. It was translated into English about 1925. It could be compared, I suppose, to *Beowulf*, or the Arthurian legend, at least in the kind of relation it bears to history.

This article reproduces some notes I gave to theology students at St Augustine's Seminary in Lesotho.

3 *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, p. 265. It is worth noting that Pritchard classifies the text as *historical*.

4 ibid: p.60f.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1977.tb02363.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

born the gods, whose restlessness upsets their parents. Apsu plans to destroy them, but they kill him and make him into their house, the upper heavens. Then Tiamat produces a brood of monsters, and Marduk, third or fourth generation god from Apsu (and also the principal god of Babylon), leads the gods to victory over them. From Tiamat's corpse he fashions earth, sky and sea. Then from the blood of a traitor god, Kingu, he makes man, to provide the gods with service and keep their tables well supplied.

The old Greek myths are recognisable here, Uranos-Kronos-Zeus. All we have in Gen. 1 are Apsu and Tiamat, transformed into the waters that are above the heavens and the waters of the deep, *Tehom*, which is etymologically related to Tiamat. No trace of the myth of the divine war. Hints of this appear elsewhere in the bible, however, transformed eventually into the story of the fall of Lucifer; see Is. 1.14, Ezek. 28, and Apoc. 12.

Gen. 1 replaces this myth with a story that is, in Rahner's distinction, historical in *form*. For it has a very definite chronology, which is a defining characteristic of history. It begins at the *beginning*, and follows a strict time-table. What the antecedents of the story's *contents* are is an open question. But this at least is clear: the timeless concept of the world, in which kings reign for 28,800 years, and in which the origin of things is timeless goings-on among the gods, has been replaced by a time scheme which is so precise that it enabled Archbishop Ussher of Armagh, about 1700 AD, to calculate that the world was begun to be created at about 3.30 p.m. on Sunday, 25th March, 4004 BC.[5] A beginning has been made in distinguishing time and eternity.

The following chapters are, as literary creations, for the most part several centuries earlier in date than Gen. 1. Perhaps we can affirm, as a simplification, that the antecedents of Gen. 2 and 3 are myths, and of the stories in 4-11, Cain and Abel, the flood, the tower of Babel, are legends. The important point is that Genesis firmly historicises them by giving them a chronology with genealogical backing.

So I find myself driven to a conclusion, the opposite of what I wanted to reach in terms of Rahner's distinction (and the opposite, I think, of what he himself had in mind): that these narratives are firmly historical in *form* (mode of expression, 'dates' in the shape of genealogies and sequence) and only very thinly historical in content, being adaptations of or counterblasts to myths and legends, of which the mythical element does not purport to relate to historical events, and the legendary element does, but in a legendary rather than a historical manner.

5 I do not pretend to be *accurately* reproducing the Archbishop's chronological conclusion. I am only interested in it as a type, and so I am already beginning to submit it to the legend or saga treatment.

This suggests that we must press the form/content distinction a little further, and be prepared in these narratives to disentangle a whole series of form/content distinctions; and to find that what is *form* in one relationship may be *content* in another. This may become clearer if we try and follow the relationships of form and content through a tentative reconstruction of how Genesis 1-11 came to be as it is. Let us start at the end of the process with P.

P dates from the exile or shortly after (550/500 BC). He composed Genesis 1 in its entirety. To him also we owe the very pronounced historical form given to the whole section by the precise chronology of the genealogies in Gen.5, 10 and 11. Clearly the idea of an historical form for a sacred narrative was both familiar and important to him. It is easy to see why. The idea was already contained in the material which he was revising and completing, the work of J (author of about 950 BC, Solomon's reign). J was not so precise about it, but still he was interested in and set forth a sequence of historical events, which is characteristic of the historical form.

J begins his story with the beginning of man; fair enough, since he is presenting a history of man's salvation. But for P this was not enough, because there was all that seductive idolatrous nonsense circulating round the exiles in Babylon about what went on *before* heaven and earth were made. (J's story began, "In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. . . then the Lord God formed man of the dust from the ground" Gen. 2:4-7).

So he must make clear that nothing happened before they were made, because they were made in the *beginning*, and apart from their maker they are all that exists. History is not just scraps of event-sequences floating in a vast, indeterminate, infinite sea of time, which is indistinguishable from timelessness; history *is* time, and time has a definite beginning; and therefore it has a definite value and meaning.

So sold is P on history, on the meaningful sequence of generations, that he puts the creation of the world into a generations series. At least he concludes his creation narrative, his prologue to J, by saying "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth, when they were created" Gen.2:4.

Now what did P think he was about, presenting the content of his creation narrative like this in historical *form?* After all, even if he accepted the J narratives in a simple fundamentalist sort of sense (and I think it would be an anachronism to assume that he did), he is unlikely to have accepted his own composition in such a way. It is psychologically improbable. He knew: (a) that his composition was a composition, not a write-up of events on the evidence of old documents etc.; (b) that he deliberately composed it as a 7 days (or rather 6 days) *history*, into which, incidentally, he had to squeeze eight divine works, which were linked to the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1977.tb02363.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

very precise genealogical chronology that he imposed on the J narrative; (c) that he believed his composition in its artificial historical form to be true.

The only inference I can draw from these premises is that the historical form he gave his non-historical content was neither a literally true nor a literally false chronology, but a palpably symbolic one, modelled on the key Jewish religious period of the week, the sabbath being the cornerstone of Israel's faith and identity during and after the exile. And if the week of creation is a symbolic chronology, then so, presumably, are the genealogies of Gen. 5, 10 and 11.

Now what is the intention of a writer who imposes a symbolic chronology, i.e. a symbolic historical form, on a non-historical content of his own, or someone else's, composition? He is conveying, isn't he, that where genuine literal history is lacking for want of evidence, it is necessary theologically to invent it. But if you invent it as literal history it will be untrue; so invent it as symbolic. And what does this do? It turns the non-historical content, on to which you have imposed a symbolically historical form, into a non-historical form with a 'metahistorical' content, a content which is 'fundamentally', but indescribably historical, there being no evidence whatever by which to describe it. In other words: P knows by inspired intuition that history is all-important; he knows likewise that it had a *beginning*, which sprang immediately from the divine creative word, and this creation and this beginning are really related chronologically and meaningfully to the salvation of Israel and our present time. But he knows literally nothing about how it happened in any descriptive sense. So he sets it out symbolically as a series of divine creative utterances.

But when you make symbolic statements, that is statements which are non-historical in form, you will normally be taken as stating something that is non-historical in content, a parable, a fable, or a myth. So to remind his hearers that there *is* a real historical content in what he is saying, he imposes on the non-historical symbolic form a further form which is symbolically historical, his symbolic chronology and genealogies. So now the hearer of average intelligence and sufficient Israelite culture can be trusted to give due appreciation both to the historicalness and the symbolicalness of the narrative, without making any awkward division between the two qualities. But then such a reader is not intellectually hamstrung, as we tend to be, by an idea of truth limited to the literally true.

So much for P. J in composing his narrative had been in a rather different situation from P, but was guided by similar principles. He had not, in fact, been engaged in composition in the same sense as went to the making of Gen.1, but in selection, modification and arrangement of materials ready to hand. In his use of

his materials, according to our *a priori* assumption,[6] he was guided by the same sort of inspired insight as we credit P with. But would such insight enable him to select, say from a variety of flood stories or paradise stories, those elements which most accurately represent the actual historical facts? Surely not. The stories do not provide that sort of historical evidence, and no amount of insight will help a man discriminate between the amounts of historical value contained in various sorts of non-evidence for unknown facts.

What, in any case, was he engaged in selecting stories from this sort of material *for?* As a prologue to his sacred history of Israel from the exodus to David, an epic work on the theme of Ps 78(77). As an Israelite he saw sacred theological meaning in his people's *history;* not just in various recurrent human situations and occasional memorable events, like the mythologers and saga-makers, but in their history, the history of their relations with their God. Now you cannot discern religious meaning in a slice of history, at least not with any consistency or profundity, if it is set in a welter of meaningless non-history. In other words, reflection on a sacred history will inevitably tend to push back behind its beginning, its Year I (behind the exodus in this case) to a proto-history or prehistory, and beyond its end to an eschatology, and also out beyond its flanks to consider the meaning, the bearing of it on the history of other peoples. J at least, impelled by his inspired intuition, achieves the first and the last of these reasonable expansions of sacred history, and provides symbolic material for prophets and the future to achieve the second of them.

He pushes behind the exodus without much difficulty, using the materials provided by tribal traditions about the ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob etc. The *content* of these traditions is for the most part amply verified as historical by modern archaeological discoveries. J uses these traditions, and no doubt modifies them a bit, to emphasise the basic theological dimensions of God's *election* and *promise* in the sacred history. On stories historical in content, though often semi-legendary in form, he imposes, like P, the historical form of a symbolic chronology, this time a symbolic arrangement of generations and kinships. What is it symbolic of? Of many things; but chiefly of the dramatic working out of these categories of *election* and *promise.*

But to have set the salvation history of Exodus to David in a context of patriarchal election and promise is not enough. Abraham was a man among men, just as Israel was a nation among nations; and one cannot understand what he (and Israel) was chosen for, or called from, except with reference to men and nations at large. J's inspired insight, in other words, tells him that *all* men,

6 The assumption of faith in the inspiration of scripture.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1977.tb02363.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

all peoples, matter in God's sight. But why, even so, was there any need to call Abraham? Because of wickedness and woe; because all men, though they matter, are in a mess—"all have sinned, and stand in need of the glory of God", Rom. 3:23. This universal human situation, need and value J historicises, that is he gives it a historical form as a prehistorical prelude to his historical patriarchal prologue. As salvation has a historical pattern, so then must the negative of salvation have a historical pattern. And this is what J sets before us in Gen. 2-11, the historical pattern, the evolution of *sin* and *death*.

For this purpose he selects stories, and doubtless modifies them more or less radically, some of which have no historical content, being mainly myth, and others very little, being mainly legend (e.g. the flood and Babel). but which he values as *type* stories of recurrent human situations. He deliberately sets these back into archetypes, presenting them as the *first* occurrence of such situations. His inspired Israelite intuition tells him 'there must have been a first time'. Human pride is recurrently trying to reach up and take over heaven by the ruthless exercise of intelligence and skill; he chooses as a typical instance the tower of Babel, and makes it the first time, and also associates it with the frustrating linguistic divisions among men. Natural disasters are recurrently overwhelming the proud works of man with divine vengeance; the flood is the archetypal 'first time'. But notice how it is linked with the divine mercy and salvation for the benefit of mankind, unlike the parallel story of Utnapishtim in the Babylonian legend.[7] a murder and fratricide are recurrent human stories, with deep psychological roots; there must have been a first brother-slaying, and we are told it in the Cain and Abel story.

In its original isolation as a story this no more represented the first fratricide than the Roman legend of Romulus and Remus, or the Sotho story of the two brothers Masilo and Masilnyane.[8] It was probably just an ancestral tale of the Kenites, Moses' relations by marriage, about their ancestor Cain, after whom they were called. J historicises it by choosing it as the first fratricide and the second sin—and treats it therefore very differently from the way the Roman and Sotho legends treat their stories.

Finally, there must have been a first and archetypal sin; and it might as well have been committed by the first man. There must have been a first man, and he must have been created by God. And since God is good, he must have been created good, and not

7 *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 93ff.

8 *Tales from the Basotho*, by Minnie Postma; tr, from the Africaans by S. McDermid; University of Texas Press, Austin and London: p. 146ff.

The story of these two brothers is more like Hans Andersen's story of Big Klaus and Little Klaus than that of Romulus and Remus or Cain and Abel—except that the elder brother Masilo does kill the younger, Masilonyane.

in the mess which made the call of Abraham necessary, and launched the whole drama of salvation history. And there are all sorts of 'if only' folk stories which dream of 'if only everything in the garden were lovely, and why isn't it, I wonder'. From them J chooses and writes up the one we know, and puts it at the beginning of human history, which as a patterned series of events, even though unrecorded events, must have had a beginning.

So that is what J does in Gen. 2-11. He employs his inspired intuition on telling us in story form one essentially *Historical* pattern (he chooses the moral pattern) of aeons of unrecorded events. He imposes symbolic historical form on mainly non-historical content; thus transforming it into non-historical form (its own myth-legend form) for what we might call a type-historical content. In so doing, of course, he considerably foreshortens those tiresome aeons, the hundreds of thousands, or perhaps millions of years of human pre-history, about which in any case he was, I suppose, blissfully ignorant. They don't matter anyway; all we need is the pre-history with its moral pattern, and without the aeons.

Having by this absurdly elaborate abracadabra succeeded in exorcising the bogey of historical falsehood in Genesis 1-11, we can indulge the supreme sophistication of reading Genesis simply as a beautifully arranged series of divinely true stories about the beginnings of the salvation history of man, the first act in the stupendous cosmic drama of God's relations with his creation, and confine ourselves to the one biblical question that really matters—what do these stories mean?

Schooling or Education? : The Inner City

Mary McAleese

I come here then, simply as a Parish Sister; yes, I have had a background of teaching. I still consider my basic missionary thrust educational but I can only speak as a Sister in Pastoral work. I will speak from nine years experience in a dockland area of Liverpool, of living and working with people there, of being there from nine in the morning till eleven at night—sometimes till one or two the next morning—for seven days a week, forty-eight weeks of the year. Just being there, living there, working there, trying to be a neighbour, a friend—in the name of Jesus. From that experience I may say things that may not make sense to you—that you may not agree with—that you may not find helpful—but just now at the beginning I want to say that I am trying to explain, as honestly

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1977.tb02363.x Published online by Cambridge University Press