The Bible, History and Mythology[1]
by Edmund Hill, O.P.

My concern in this article is to defend the total truth of the Bible. I am old-fashioned enough (of course I really mean orthodox enough) to hold that every word of the Bible is true, to use a rather loose figure of speech. But I am also rational enough, I hope, and just modern enough to concede that a pretty good case can be made against the Bible being totally true, and it can be made in the name of history, and with the accusation of mythology.

Each of these words has a different bearing on the truth of the Bible. History is a very respectable word, and if I say that the Bible contains history, that it gives an account of salvation history, or that Christianity is a historical religion, the reader will doubless accept the statement as true, if trite. But mythology is still rather a disreputable word, and if I say that the Bible not only contains myth but presents us with a salvation myth, and that Christianity is a mythological religion, some of my readers may be tempted to wish me burned at the stake. Yet I am prepared to say so, with qualification, and still to maintain that the Bible is totally true. In fact, I think the mythology charge against it is easier to meet than the charge of containing bad, or false, history.

In any case, it is clear that a defence of its truth will involve us in a consideration of the meaning of these two words 'history' and 'mythology', not to mention the word 'truth', as well as requiring us to examine the facts in the shape of biblical texts. The neatest way to proceed would doubtless be, first to say what I mean by these words, and then to look at the biblical evidence in the light of my clear definitions. But alas, I am not very good at clear definitions, and in any case I am going to be putting the words 'truth' and 'history' in particular through such acrobatic contortions that I need a fairly solid framework or trapeze on which to do it. So I prefer to proceed *more concreto* by looking at some of the more problematic texts and discussing in what sense they can be called historical, in what sense mythical, and in what sense true. The most crucial texts are those that tell us about the beginning of things and those that tell us about the end. But we will get to the end from the beginning very soberly through the middle.

The beginning of things

We begin then with *Genesis* 1-11, chapters which, for all the diversity of the material they contain, form a unit held together

[1]Based on a public lecture originally delivered at St Michael's Church, Rondebosch, Cape Town.

like beads on a string by the genealogies. We have the five episodes of the hexameron, paradise and the fall, Cain and Abel and an appendix on Cain's descendants, the flood with its obscure introduction about sons of God, daughters of men and giants, and its appendices about the rainbow and Noah's drunkenness, and the tower of Babel. Then the genealogy string sticks out beyond the last bead, to tie on to the story of Abraham. It is the genealogies that give cohesion to these chapters; therefore it is the genealogies that give them their form. And let us not forget that besides the great genealogies of 5 and 11 we have a little genealogy at the end of the creation narrative in 2, 4. It runs 'These are the generations —i.e. this is the genealogy—of heaven and earth, when they were created'. Thus the hexameron is firmly tied into the genealogical form.

Now a genealogy is only an archaic kind of chronology, and chronology is the backbone of history. So the conclusion is inescapable that at least in the eyes of P, who put in the genealogies and the hexameron at the time of the exile (*c.* 550 BC), the narrative of 1-11 is a historical one. I think this is equally certain for the earlier editor J, who put the stories together without genealogies or hexameron about 950 BC. But at any rate in the Bible as it now stands the stories come to us definitely intended for history.

But bizarre history, surely? To say nothing about the content of the stories, much of which taxes the credulity of us moderns if taken literally as history, there are the genealogies themselves. It is not just Methuselah living 969 years, for example; it is the curious correspondences you get if you go to the trouble of making a time chart. Thus Noah was born in 1056 AC (*anno creationis*), 84 years *before* the death of Adam's grandson Enosh, who was Noah's grand-father[5], i.e. his great-great-great-great-great-grandfather. Methuselah himself died very expeditiously in the year of the flood, 1656 AC— perhaps he was a very naughty old man. But it is after the flood that we get the oddest correspondences; thus Abraham was born in 1946 AC, 60 years before Noah died in 2006 AC; and Abraham himself died in 2121 AC at a ripe old age, and yet 35 years *before* the death of Shem, his grandfather[7], in 2156 AC.

I think I need not labour the point that we cannot take the genealogies seriously as reliable and accurate historical chronology. Most of us simply cannot believe that the world was created in 4004 BC, which is the date, according to Archbishop Ussher, that the genealogies would yield. So our dilemma is very obvious. All this, being chronological, undeniably purports to be history, and as history it is bunk; it is not true. Clearly it is high time to start putting this word 'history' through its acrobatic paces. For the modern historian history means at the very least the accurate recording of the past in the light of whatever evidence is available. If the evidence does not allow precise chronology or precise des-

cription of events, then the historian must say so. These old genealogies err by an unwarranted, a most unlikely, and therefore a false precision. But *only* if those priestly editors of *c.* 550 BC were writing history in the way modern historians understand it. As they were not, in fact, modern historians, there is no reason why we should condemn them for being bad modern historians.

We can put it like this; if we interpret *Genesis* 1-11 as descriptive history in the modern sense, then it is untrue. But we have no business to interpret it like that, because that is not what the composers of these texts intended them to be. Let us suppose they intended to write what I will call symbolic history; then although we will be unable to verify it by modern historical methods, there is no reason why we should deny it to be true; though it is not going to be easy, and in detail will probably be impossible, to find out what it means.

But what can the very idea of symbolic history mean, and why should anyone want to write it, and in what sense is it true? The handiest way to answer these questions will be to interview the first author/editor, J, who collected, rewrote and arranged these stories about 950 BC. Needless to say, it will be a hypothetical interview—a little piece of symbolic history.

E.H. Could you tell us, Sir, for our theological readers, what your intentions were in telling those tall stories at the beginning of Genesis?
J. Do call me J. The point of those tall stories, as you call them, can only be grasped in relation to the larger work I undertook, to which they form a kind of prologue.
E.H. And was this larger work historical?
J. Definitely. Indeed, I may modestly claim to have invented the theologico-literary art form of *Heilsgeschichte*.
E.H. It would have made it much easier for us, J, if you had thought of the name as well. Could you give us an outline of this history of yours?
J. With pleasure. You could describe it as a kind of prose epic— only fragments of it survive in your Bibles; it was abominably re-edited by those fellows D and P, who introduced elements from the second-rate plagiarist E. Editors rarely have soul, I find. However, my design was to write the story of God's dealings with his people Israel. It seemed to me that in the history of Israel from Moses to David, and specially in the person and achievement of David, Yahweh's power of salvation was at work; that this history meant something; that possession of Canaan and the definitive establishment of Israel in peace and security under David, Yahweh's anointed, represented the fulfilment of a promise by Yahweh, of a destiny or saving plan for Israel.
E.H. And the promise of Yahweh was made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the ancestors of the people?

J. That's right. The story couldn't start with Moses and the covenant; it had to start with the promises made to Abraham, and also with the summons made to Abraham, the summons to faith. Without that beginning the covenant with Moses, and then the final concluding covenant with David, would have had no point.

E.H. Why didn't you just start with Abraham, then?

J. Well, don't you see? Abraham wasn't the absolute beginning. He was called out of something, out of a situation. And Israel didn't exist in a void; it existed in a situation of other peoples. More than that, it existed *for* other peoples, its destiny was their concern, their destiny. This was particularly clear to me, because while I was fully involved in Israelite life—my family were secretaries to David and Solomon—I was in fact a foreigner.

E.H. Really? That's interesting. I wonder if anyone has ever guessed this up to now?

J. I think it was guessed by a Jesuit called Burrows, who noticed that the Hebrew scribes had difficulty with the name of David's secretary—my father, actually—variously named Shewa, Shawsha, Shisha, and Seraiah.[1]

E.H. Fascinating. But please explain why this forces you to start before Abraham.

J. Well, the key to my whole concept of this historical epic I composed is God's promise to Abraham, 'In your seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves'.[2] God in fact was promising all the nations through Abraham's seed (i.e. Israel) a blessing, the blessing of salvation from the frustrations of the human situation which we call sin and death.

Now this situation must have existed before Abraham, otherwise God's promise to him would have had no point. So I had to describe it somehow. As I was composing a historical epic, I had to describe it in historical form. The trouble was, I had no real historical evidence, as you people understand it, about what happened before Abraham. So in a way I had to invent a pre-history, leading up to Abraham. But to invent history that will still be true, though invented, is a real challenge to one's ingenuity. I solved the problem rather neatly, I think, by selecting a number of myths—mainly from my knowledge of other cultures than that of Israel—which graphically symbolized the human condition; rewriting them more or less dramatically, because their interpretation of the human condition and human aspirations by no means always squared with my Israelite faith in the loving kindness and fidelity of Yahweh; and then linking them in a dramatically satisfying order, as a piece of what you aptly call symbolic history.

That then is the point of those tall stories, as you rather less

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[1] *The Oracles of Jacob and Balaam*, by Eric Burrows (London 1939). References for the names are, in order, 2 Sam. 20, 25; 1 Chr. 18, 16; 1 Kgs 4, 3; 2 Sam. 8, 17.

[2] Gen. 12, 3.

aptly call them. They typify the progressively deteriorating human condition, from which it is Yahweh's gracious purpose to save us; and they give this human condition a historical dimension. It was essential for me to break the wheel of time idea, which was more or less endemic in the myths at my disposal.

I hope the reader will forgive my little piece of frivolity, which I indulge in as a useful illustration of the sort of truth symbolic history can be expected to have, and the sort it cannot. I of course think that my presentation of J's intentions is roughly speaking true. It may well not be; the whole J hypothesis may be highly dubious. But at least I can presume that the truth of my case will not be criticized on the grounds that J never did really and literally ask me to call him J, or tell me about a modern scholar called Burrows.

A way of defining, after thus illustrating, what I mean by symbolic history would be to say that it is historicized myth; it is mythological stories, or stories with elements of myth in them, cast into a historical form. Its truth clearly does not depend on its historical or descriptive accuracy, since it does not lay claim to any such quality. Its truth depends on whether it rings true to life, as we say about a novel; or in a theological context, whether it rings true to faith. If you come to think of it, it is hard to see how the sacred authors could have given us a theologically significant, revelational account of origins except by such a technique as historicized myth, or symbolic history. It had to be a *historical* account, because the historical is an indispensable dimension of God's saving revelation. It could not be literally or descriptively historical, because they had even less evidence about origins, whether human or cosmic, than we have. So it had to be latched on to the more or less descriptive history of Israel as a piece of symbolic history, asserting 1° that there was a beginning in time to the historical time series we are now involved in, and 2° that the human condition of alienation, with the hope of divine reconciliation, is a historical condition, not just the ups and downs of a never-ending see-saw, or a cyclical rhythm like recurring decimals.

The myths which Israel shared with or borrowed from her pagan neighbours and predecessors, together with much of their ritual, serve well as a material foundation for these purposes, because they display genuine insights into the human condition, and express by a powerful symbolism genuine deep human aspiration. But they have to be historicized in order to safeguard the truth both of God's transcendence and of man's. The biblical authors had to set man free from the cyclical rhythms of the wheel of nature to which the myths so readily tie him, sensitive as the myths are to the seasonal patterns of life and nature. They had to do this because man *is* partly free of these rhythms; he transcends them since he

has a goal or goals, whereas nature in its circling rhythms, though man's life depends on them, is intrinsically goal-less.

Likewise, the authors had to set God free from the manifold nature gods with whom the myths tend to confuse him, because although he is only known through the numinous and awe-inspiring cosmos symbolically represented by these gods, he *is* wholly and absolutely free of his creation. That is why the historical is an indispensable category of God's saving revelation; it is the only means of liberating both man and his understanding of God from the cosmos. It is the only means of liberating the cosmos itself from itself by giving it meaning, a goal, destiny. There will be a new heaven and a new earth; such, to jump ahead a little, is the final truth conveyed by symbolic history or historicized myth.

The middle of things

I used the phrase just now 'the more or less descriptive history of Israel', and I had better explain what I mean. The history of Israel, as the Bible presents it to us from Abraham to the apostles, can be called descriptive to the extent that modern historians with their objective criteria could verify its content. The Bible is a genuine and valuable source for the modern historian studying the ancient history of Palestine. But on the other hand no modern historian would present that history as the Bible presents it.[1] The biblical writers had other concerns than mere objective accuracy; they were indeed quite happily prepared to sacrifice such accuracy (if they even gave it a thought) to these other concerns, or to fill in the gaps in their strictly historical knowledge with other non-historical material of a legendary, folk-lore, ritual or mythical character.

And so processes analogous to that of historicizing myth, which we have seen applied to the origins, continued to be used in the subsequent treatment of the story. Let us note, by the way, that 'story' and 'history' are really the same word; indeed 'story' is the Italian for history, and 'history' is the French for a story, which perhaps reveals the attitude to truth of these two Latin nations. We have distinguished them into two quite independent literary forms, but it is highly doubtful whether the biblical writers ever did so. We continue therefore to get this very same technique of inserting a myth into a historical setting. Take Samson for example. Like Hercules he looks like a sun hero, and his adventures like sun myths put into a historical setting. But the myth has been almost totally demythologized into a folk tale of a local hero. As such it serves well enough to illustrate the point which the editor of *Judges* is making in the course of his book; but it would be foolish to treat it as descriptive history.

Another common process is the schematizing one. History in

[1] See, for example, John Bright's excellent *History of Israel* (British edition, London 1960).

cold fact, as what happens, is a distressingly formless and pattern-less jumble of events. Even modern authors therefore will try to bring some order into the chaos by the arrangement of their material. The biblical authors were much less inhibited in doing this. They give us a schematized picture of Israel coming out of Egypt, all twelve tribes in neat formation. At the same time they guilelessly provide the modern historian with a lot of evidence to suggest that it did not really happen so neatly at all. Another instance of schema-tization is the patriarchal series of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the twelve 'stamvaders', presented as father, son, grandson and great-grandsons. This family tree is not intended to meet the standards of a registrar of births, marriages and deaths.

The most interesting process, however, is one which I can only call mythologized history. This is treating a historical event in mythological language. In its purest form it is treating a historical event as a myth, and losing all interest in its historical character. But the Bible itself does not mythologize history in this pure form, because it always retains interest in the historical event as history. What the Bible does is use myth to interpret history.

The clearest example is to be found not so much perhaps in the actual narrative of the Exodus as in later reflections on that episode in the psalms and the prophets. In these texts the exodus from Egypt is described in terms of a creation myth. It is a myth we are familiar with above all from Babylonian texts, in which creation is the outcome of a titanic struggle between the gods of the sky, especially their champion hero god, and the demonic monsters of the Deep, Chaos, the nether waters. Now this myth is almost entirely suppressed in *Genesis* 1; another model is used there of the potent, indeed omnipotent spell spinner, the super wizard or magician. But the conflict myth comes into its own later on in the Bible (cf. Ps. 89, 7-10; Ps. 74, 12-17).

The most obvious example comes from Isaiah:

> Awake, awake! Clothe yourself in strength,
> arm of Yahweh.
> Awake as in the past,
> in times of generations long ago.
> Did you not split Rahab in two,
> and pierce the Dragon through?
> Did you not dry up the sea,
> the waters of the great Abyss,
> to make the sea-bed a road
> for the redeemed to cross?[1]

The end of things

This brings us to a consideration of texts that tell us about the end. The texts are mainly NT ones, our Lord's so-called eschato-

[1]Is. 51, 9-10.

logical discourses, and the *Revelation* of St John. One must, I think, call it historical in the attenuated sense that it tells of a future which is linked chronologically to the present; of an end to that which we are now in the middle of. What it is *not* is simple history written in advance, i.e. it is not straightforward, precise and accurate prediction, subject to eventual objective verification. The end of things is as indescribable and unimaginable as the beginning of things. Yet the Bible presumes to assert that there was a beginning and will be an end; and it also presumes to declare the meaning or shape of the beginning, and the meaning or shape of the end. What it does not presume, because it is not able, to do is to describe the contents of either beginning or end.

But there is an important difference between the Bible's treatment of the beginning and of the end. There, the materials used were what you might call raw myth. Here, whatever myth elements there may be, they have all been pre-cooked; they are borrowed directly, not from the world of mythology but from the world of the OT itself. This is true whether you take the simplest account of the end, *Mark* 13, or the most elaborate, *Revelation*. Perhaps we might tentatively define the *genre* not so much as mythologized history as biblicized history. With the aid of mythical symbols the OT in general and the prophets in particular discerned certain dramatic patterns or themes at work in history. The NT sees these patterns as working out to a grand climax or resolution at the end of time.

Already in the OT they had crystallized to some extent round the figure of the Messiah as the man of the future. Much more so in the NT do they crystallize round Jesus the Messiah, the man of the future which is already present in him. In *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (p. 80), Bultmann writes, 'It is precisely the mythological description of Jesus Christ in the NT which makes it clear that the figure and work of Jesus Christ must be understood in a manner which is beyond the categories by which the objective historian understands world history, if . . . his work is to be understood as the divine work of redemption'. I am not as a rule very sympathetic to Bultmann's demythologizing method of interpretation; but I think that that at least is a very illuminating statement. I would however modify the phrase 'mythological description' to 'biblical or biblico-mythological description'. For it is significant that the NT does not mythologize Jesus, but rather biblicizes him by describing him, usually only by implication, as another Samson, a new David, a second Moses, a second Adam, the suffering servant of Yahweh; figures in which the raw myths of the uninhibited mythologers had been cooked and pre-digested and historicized by the OT prophetical writers.

Jesus, thus interpreted in his paschal mystery, is the end, the eschaton, the last times, the fulfilment of the ages; and the *eschaton*,

presented in this kind of symbols, is Jesus coming, as we say, again. It is remarkable how the origin symbols, the various creation myths which the OT employed, cluster in the NT round the account of the paschal mystery (passion to Pentecost) and again in the *Revelation* account of the last things. Thus the NT shows us the end of things, already accomplished in the Christ event, still to be manifested at the *eschaton*, as a return to the origins. It will be, and now is, a victory over the monsters of the deep, the ancient dragon, the powers of darkness; a cancelling of the curse of Babel, of the curse of Cain (by blood speaking better things than Abel's), of the curse of Adam; a regaining of paradise and access to the tree of life; a new creation.

The use of these biblico-mythological symbols is indispensable for conveying the divine promise and the Christian hope. We saw above that the historical category was indispensable as a tool for liberating both man and God from bondage to the recurring and in itself meaningless cycle of nature, the rhythmic pattern discerned by myth. This liberation is the assertion of the proper transcendence of both man and God. But perhaps we can now say that a further liberation is necessary; both man and God also to be set free from history. It needs to be asserted that both man and God do transcend the in itself even more meaningless pattern of interminable chronological succession, which is the meaninglessness that perhaps holds a special threat for modern secular man, in bondage to the *saeculum*. The Bible uses history to set us free from myth, and more important for us moderns, it uses myth to set us free from history. This dual and total freedom is the achievement and meaning of the truth, the truth to which every word of the Bible bears witness.

Marriage and Mysterion
Reflections of a Bush Theologian[1]
by Adrian Edwards, C.S.Sp.

'Europeans say', I remarked to Cosmas Daudu,[2] 'that a man with several wives cannot bring up his children properly.' 'That is not so', he retorted, 'my father had eight wives. In the evening, he would gather us round the fire, and begin to ask us what we would

[1]'Bush' in Northern Nigerian English has two meanings, the one geographical—away from towns or motor roads—and the other depreciative—boorish, ignorant, unskilled. I am a bush theologian in both these senses. I ask readers to remember my almost total lack of works of reference.

[2]Cosmas Daudu, as second catechist at the Tor Donga mission, in the Tiv Division of the Benue-Plateau State, often travelled with me and helped me with translations into Tiv. He has now an entry to a teacher-training college.