

# Time and Telling: How to read biblical stories

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There is probably no more serious threat to the Church throughout the world than the multiplication of fundamentalist sects. According to Robin Gill, 'Fundamentalism may be defined tentatively as a system of beliefs and practices which treat scriptural absolutism as the way to counter the pluralism and relativism engendered by modernity.'<sup>1</sup> In our new 'age of anxiety', they offer certainty and security. God has spoken and He has spoken clearly and this is what He has said. A proper analysis of fundamentalism would have to examine its rise in various forms in different faiths, including our own, and its political and social implications. In this article I wish to perform the much more limited task of suggesting how it is that a fundamentalist reading of the text relies upon thoroughly modern presuppositions as to how a text should be read. It is as contemporary as the relativism against which it protests. All narrative assumes a particular perception of space and time, the fundamental framework of any story. If we wish to break the hold of such a literalistic reading of the text we must become sensitive to its conventions of chronology and geography. Upon what clock and map does it rely? In particular I wish to suggest that a fundamentalist reading of scripture relies upon a modern understanding of time.<sup>2</sup>

Let us start with St. John's account of the death of Christ:

Since it was the day of Preparation, in order to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath (for that sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him; and when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. 19:31 — 34.

The Evangelist insists that this is a true account of what happened—'This is vouched for by an eyewitness, whose evidence is to be trusted' (v. 35). But what does that entail? What sort of eye is in question? If an extraterrestrial being armed with a video recorder had shot a film sequence, would it have confirmed these details? For a fundamentalist, this would be so because the true eyewitness is the impartial eye, the disengaged observer without preconception, who stands on the edge of

the crowd simply receptive to sense data, like the scientist gazing down his microscope. But this is only one way of being an eyewitness. Most Christians in the early centuries would also have believed that John gives us a true eyewitness account, but the eyewitness was never merely a passive recipient of sense impressions but a participant, who brought with him or her stories and traditions that moulded and structured a perception of the event. And this is evident in their understanding of time.

Jesus' side is opened and out flows water and blood, just as Adam's side was opened when Eve was created. And it was common in patristic exegesis to see here a reference to the New Adam bringing forth the New Eve, the Church with her sacraments of baptism and eucharist. This event is not just the death of a man in the third decade of the first century. It is also the time of creation, in which God's making of humanity comes to some sort of completion, just as is that eighth day after the Resurrection when Jesus will breathe the Holy Spirit on the disciples as God breathed his Spirit on the first Adam so that he became a living being. But yet another time is evoked too. John has advanced the time of Jesus' death, as given by the synoptic tradition, by twenty four hours so that now he dies at the time that the paschal lambs are slaughtered in the Temple; the Temple liturgy also laid down that their limbs are not to be broken. This is the time of the new Exodus from sin and death. So three times are evoked, of Creation, of the Exodus, of the slaughter of paschal lambs, to describe the death of this man on the hill.

Le Goff once wrote that, 'Perhaps the most important way the urban bourgeoisie spread its culture was the revolution it effected in the mental categories of medieval man. The most spectacular of these revolutions, without a doubt, was the one that concerned the concept and measurement of time.'<sup>3</sup> It has been said that since the Enlightenment we have lived in 'homogeneous, empty time', to use the phrase of Walter Benjamin<sup>4</sup>. It is the time of physics. It took the invention of the modern mechanical clock with its 'verge and foliot escapement' before we could perceive time in this way. There was an intimate link, though the patterns of causality are too complex to be unilinear, between a technological development and the eventual formulation of Newton's definition of time: 'Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external.'<sup>5</sup>

One of the most famous early mechanical clocks was the astrarium of Giovanni de Dondi, designed in the mid-fourteenth century. Its main purpose was not so much to tell the time as to demonstrate the revolution of the stars and the planets. It was a mechanical representation of the universe, a miniature planetarium. Such mechanisms became extremely popular and are symptomatic of the transition from one perception of time to another. To discover what happened we must return to the Bible and see what sense was given to the earliest of all clocks, the revolution of the stars.

According to the first chapter of Genesis, 'God said "Let there be lights in the vault of the heavens to separate day from night, and let them serve as signs both for festivals and for seasons and years."' (v. 14) So the passage of the stars does not merely indicate the passage of time. They tell us when to celebrate the festivals, the moments for praising God. Their calendar marks the rhythm of the liturgy. Time is doxological. During Jesus' lifetime, at the end of each month the court of priests gathered to hear the first witnesses come and swear that the light of the new moon had been spotted. Then the chief of the court of priests would declare 'It is hallowed' and all the people answered 'It is hallowed; it is hallowed', and bonfires would be lit to proclaim the new month to the world.<sup>6</sup> The beginning of the month was a holy event. Time was diffused from the Temple.

Since the stars marked out the moments for praising God, it was only right and proper that they should join in too. God asks Job where he was when 'the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy' (38:7). The sky was a vast choir of praise. No doubt the stars had originally been minor deities, demoted to musicians. So the revolving of the heavens was no impersonal mechanism that would carry on turning after God had given it an initial push, but the objective sign and sacrament of God's will and purpose, that his name would be praised.

It followed that it was of vital importance to possess the right and true calendar. There was no possibility of participating in the celestial liturgy if one was a day out. The Sabbath rest was a sharing in the rest of the of the heavenly court. Communities established their identities by their calendars. The Essenes on the Dead Sea had a different liturgical *Ordo* from the Jerusalem Temple, as did the Book of Enoch. The wicked stars are those which fail to rise and set on time and so mislead the faithful (1 Enoch 18:12).

Raymond Brown has demonstrated that the first part of John's gospel shows how Jesus replaces the principal celebrations of the Jewish liturgy. He is the fulfilment of the Temple, the Sabbath, the Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Feast of Dedication. He is the new paschal lamb, and the source of living water. That is to say that the revolution of the stars and planets, the rising and setting of the sun and moon, the whole rhythm of the cosmos, finds its purpose in him. It is in him that the will of God becomes manifest and God's praise is made perfect.

If one's perception of time is shaped by the recurrence of the festivals and the revolutions of the stars, then the time structure of one's stories will be both repetitive and sequential. During the Babylonian Exile the Jews had to live within a culture that had both a sense of the passage of history and of liturgical cycle. Every year the New Year ceremonies in Esanglia, the Temple of Marduk, included the recitation on the fourth day of the *Enuma Elish* ('When on High'), the story of

how Marduk slaughtered the sea monster Tiamat and created the world. Every year the original order of the universe was evoked and restored; every year was a new year and a return to the beginning of time. And when the Jews watched the gorgeous processions, the celebrations of a cosmic order that found expression in the power of Babylon, they must have wondered what story they themselves could tell and what time might promise. This is one of the stories that they came to share:

Awake, awake, put on strength,  
O arm of the Lord;  
    awake, as in days of old,  
        the generations of long ago.  
Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces,  
that didst pierce the dragon?  
Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,  
the waters of the great deep;  
that didst make the depths of the sea a way  
for the redeemed to pass over?  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall pass away.

(Isaiah 51: 9 — 10)

This too is a story of the beginning, the slaughter of a primeval sea monster, only it is Rahab rather than Tiamat. But historical events are not in this case a return to an original order. Rather, the story of creation is used to describe the event of the Exodus and the passage through the Red Sea. And both these events have come to prefigure a future event, the return home from Babylon. So time is neither simply cyclical nor sequential, but spiralling through a history that encompasses repetition and difference. To tell the story aright is to detect the resonance, catch the echoes of this rich rhythm of time which is neither homogenous nor empty.

If one's narratives are structured by this liturgical time, then clearly events which are linked in God's salvific purpose, moments of redemption or destruction, must have this relationship embedded in the calendar. They are, in some sense, the same event and so occupy the same liturgical locus. So, in the time of Jesus, it was believed that Abraham must have taken Isaac to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah on the 15th Nissan, the day of the Passover. The revolution of the stars, the messengers of God's will, binds together events which bear the same marks of God's purpose. The lamb that is slaughtered in the Temple is the lamb that was found in the bush and so to talk of each in terms of the other is to tell a truthful history.

One example of this 'liturgical synchronicity' is the Haggadah of the Passover, in which every victory over God's enemies has been carefully

timed to occur on this same night of liberation:

Thou, O Lord, didst destroy the head of each firstborn on the night of the celebration of Pesach; But thy firstborn, O Almighty, didst Thou pass over because of the blood of the sacrifice of Pesach,

With which my doors were marked, so that the destroyer should not enter on Pesach;

The enclosed city (Jericho) fell on Pesach;

Midian was destroyed by means of the barley cake of the Omer on Pesach;

The princes of Pul and Lud were consumed at the very moment when the sacrifice smoked on Pesach.

He (The King) stayed yet one more day in Nob until the advent of the time of Pesach;

An invisible hand wrote prophecy the destruction of Zul (Babylon) on Pesach. Just when the royal table was magnificently decked on Pesach ....

The moment will one day come at which Thou wilt bring that double misfortune on Utsis (Edom) on Pesach.

Thy hand will then be victorious, thy right hand exalted, as on that night whereon Thou didst institute the festival of Pesach.<sup>7</sup>

History was not, as Henry Ford said, just 'one damn thing after another'. To tell it truthfully one must detect the echoes and ramifications of events which began long before. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, then Israel at last makes its way through the desert to the Promised land without sinning; when Jesus goes to his Passion carrying his cross, then here is Isaac on his way to Mount Moriah; when Jesus' side is opened on the cross and out pours blood and water, then the creation of Adam and Eve comes to completion. The true eyewitness is the one who participates in the events of redemption rather than the mythical, impassive and uninvolved bystander. Those who can really see what is happening are the ransomed who 'come to Zion with singing'. The Babylonian melon seller who might have stood by the roadside watching a band of ragged refugees going home could not have told the true story. He did not have the right calendar. He did not understand the meaning of the rising and setting of the stars and planets.

There could no more be homogeneous and empty space than homogeneous and empty time. A neutral geography was as unimaginable as a history told from no one's point of view. A map of the world is a picture of God's will and at its centre is Jerusalem, the world's navel, and at the centre of Jerusalem the holy mountain, with the Temple, a microcosm of the Universe. So the Temple was a picture of space, as the calendar was a picture of time. Events which had the same meaning must have occurred in the same place.

The mountain of Isaac's sacrifice must be the same as the mountain

upon which the lambs are now sacrificed. This was where Adam was created from the dust of the Temple site, and it was on this mountain that Adam lived after he was expelled from Eden awaiting the redemption that would be offered on this same mountain. It was here that Noah built an altar to offer sacrifice after the Flood. Logically one might have hoped that God would have offered the tablets of the Law to the Israelites here rather a few hundred miles south on Mt Sinai. But the Jews were not deterred: 'Whence did Sinai come? R. Jose taught: Out of Mount Moriah; out of the place where our father Isaac had been bound as a sacrifice, Sinai plucked itself out as a priest's portion is plucked out of the bread.'<sup>8</sup>

There are two ways to loosen the hold of a particular way of seeing the world and so become attuned to other narrative conventions. One is to describe how other people see time and space, and this I have done briefly. Another way is to recount the genesis of our own way of describing events. This I shall do even more sketchily.

From classical times until the end of the Middle Ages water clocks were widely used. They were not very accurate and immensely complicated. In part this was due to the fact that the hours that they measured varied according to the time of the year. An hour was a twelfth part of the day or night time and so was constantly lengthening or diminishing. With the mechanical clock we have the appearance of a standard and unvarying hour of sixty minutes. Time no longer reflected the rising and setting of the sun. It was no longer liturgical time, and the hours were no longer the hours of the Office, of the praise of God. Instead of the *très riches heures* of the Duc de Berry one has the standard hour which determined work in the textile industry of northern Italy. Instead of holy time, the calendar of holy days and festivals, of fasting and feasting, time became secular. The Puritan calendar was symptomatic of the emergence of a new perception of time. With the invention of the watch, time became private rather than necessarily communal. It is interesting that one of the first watches we know of in England was that given by Henry VIII to his fifth wife, Catherine Howard.

Let me quote Whitrow:

The invention of an accurate mechanical clock had a tremendous influence on the concept of time itself. For, unlike the clocks that preceded it, which tended to be irregular in their operation, the improved mechanical clock when properly regulated could tick uniformly and continually for years on end, and so must have greatly strengthened belief in the homogeneity and continuity of time. The mechanical clock was therefore not only the prototype instrument for the mechanical conception of the universe but for the modern idea of time. An even more far-reaching influence has been claimed for it by Lewis Mumford, who has pointed out that

'It dissociated time from human events and helped create belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences: the special world of science.'<sup>9</sup>

The stars went on turning, the sun rising and setting, but our sense of what it meant to live in a revolving cosmos was changed. It was no longer the embodiment of God's objective purpose, the shape of his saving will, but a mechanism that carried on ticking away like a great clock.

This meant that the way in which we told and heard narratives had to change; new stories for a new world. To describe the transformation of narrative conventions would be an immensely long and complex task and so I can do no more than refer to the work of Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, in which he shows how new scientific perception of reality, the world of Locke and Newton, was related to the appearance of stories told about ordinary people, with ordinary names, who gain their individual identity by being located in our time and space. The novels of Defoe and Fielding and Richardson have particular philosophical presuppositions which might not have been possible if it had not been for the evolution of the 'verge and foliot escapement' of the mechanical clock. Says Watt:

The 'principle of individuation' accepted by Locke was that of existence at a particular locus in space and time; since, as he wrote, 'ideas become general by separating from the circumstances of time and space, so they become particular only when both these circumstances are specified. In the same way the characters of the novel can only be individualised if they are set in a particularized time and place.'<sup>10</sup>

When we ask whether we must believe that a scriptural text is true, literally true, then often we mean: 'But what would I have seen if I had been passing by at the time? What would the unprejudiced eye have spotted? If I had been at the feeding of the five thousand, would I have seen bits of bread and fish springing spontaneously into existence? Or would I have seen people embarrassedly producing rolls which they had kept tucked up their sleeves just in case ...?' When we ask such questions then I believe that we must answer that often we cannot know. We are asking questions which often imply a point of perception which the biblical authors could not have imagined. This is not to say, as I have argued elsewhere, that we can have no knowledge of historical events which underlie the biblical claims.<sup>11</sup> Rather, our eyewitnesses could not have imagined that the stance of disengagement gives one any privileged access to what 'really' is happening. Such a belief depends upon the assumption that a particular scientific culture offers the proper paradigm of all true knowledge, that the one who sees most truly is the scientist looking down his microscope or up his telescope.

It is, of course, an illusion to imagine that such a perspective upon the world is free of prejudice or preconception. It is deeply related, as Jurgen Habermas has shown in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, to a



particular economic and political system. The 'disengaged ego' remains firmly in control of his environment. As Charles Taylor has written:

The subject of disengagement and rational control has become a familiar modern figure. One might almost say it has become one way of construing ourselves, which we find it hard to shake off. It is one aspect of our inescapable contemporary sense of inwardness. As it develops to its full form through Locke and the Enlightenment thinkers he influenced, it becomes what I want to call the 'punctual self'. The key to this figure is that it gains control through disengagement.<sup>12</sup>

It is a disengagement that seeks ultimately to disincarnate us and that requires, as Nagel argues, 'a departure from a specifically human or even mammalian viewpoint'<sup>13</sup>. This is remote from a Christian belief in one who 'became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth'.

It is no accident that the stories that we tell, and the framework of space and time that they presuppose, are related to the emergence of industrial society. As Mumford wrote, 'the clock, not the steam engine, is the key to the modern industrial age.'<sup>14</sup> If the standard hour emerged because of the needs of the textile trade, so a standard national time, Greenwich Mean Time, emerged because of the need for a single time for the railway timetables. Indeed, it was first known as 'railway time'. Germany imposed a single national time in 1891 so as to enable military co-ordination in time of war. In fact, it was the need for simultaneous attack from the trenches in the First World War that finally made the wrist watch a normal item of male dress. So perceptions of space and time are never innocent. The disengagement is more apparent than real, for it is in view of a mastery of the environment. It is an epistemological stance which D.H. Lawrence effectively unmasks when he ponders on a visit to Bertrand Russell in Cambridge:

What does Russell really want? He wants to keep his own established ego, his finite and ready-defined self intact, free from contact and connection. He wants to be ultimately a free agent. That is what they all want, ultimately ... so that in their own souls they can be independent little gods, referred to nowhere and to nothing, little mortal Absolutes, secure from questions.<sup>15</sup>

The study of Scripture can be demanding. Our ears are not attuned to the echoes and resonances, the barely suggested references, the hinted connections. Is it really necessary that one should need a degree to study the Word of God? Could the work of these simple fishermen be so complex and sophisticated? Did we have to wait all this time before the Word was unveiled to God's people? Perhaps it is hard work not because the narratives of the Bible are complex but because we are. We have evolved a particular perception of 'homogeneous and empty time' to which, anyway, neither novelists like Joyce nor scientists struggling with



special theories of relativity grant unqualified assent anymore.

Study of Scripture invites us not only to enter a different narrative tradition but offers a deep critique of our way of looking at the world. It invites us to surrender the safe security of the disengaged reader, to lose our mastery, to give up being 'little mortal Absolutes', to entrust ourselves to the flow and thrust of a story beyond our control, like the one who, we believe, gave himself into other people's hands so that we might live.

- 1 *Competing Convictions*, London 1989, p. 23.
- 2 Unfortunately at the time of writing I had not had the benefit of reading the interesting article by Albert Paretsky OP, 'Proleptic Recapitulation: Passover, Eucharist and God's saving acts', in *New Blackfriars*, December 1990, pp. 541—547.
- 3 *The Fontana Economic History of Europe: the Middle Ages*, quoted by G.J. Whitrow, in *Time in History: View of Time from Prehistory to the Present Day*. Oxford 1989, p. xi.
- 4 *Illuminations*, New York 1969, p. 261, quoted by Charles Taylor in *Sources of The Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge 1989, p. 288.
- 5 Quoted by Whitrow, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
- 6 Ed. S. Safrai & M. Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, Vol 2, Assen 1976, p. 847.
- 7 Rabbi Dr. Marcus Lehmann of Mainz, *The Passover Haggadah*, Jerusalem 1977, p. 320.
- 8 Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: a Study in Matthean Theology*, Sheffield 1985, p. 55—57.
- 9 *op. cit.* p. 127.
- 10 *The Rise of the Novel*, London 1957, p. 21.
- 11 *New Blackfriars*, March 1988.
- 12 *op. cit.* p. 160.
- 13 *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge 1979, ch. 14.
- 14 *loc. cit.*
- 15 *Collected Letters*, Vol. I, p. 360, quoted by F. Kerr OP, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, Oxford, 1986, p. 60.