

## 'A book of myth or a chronicle of history?'

Everybody knows that the band on the liner "Titanic" played "Nearer, my God, to thee" as the supposedly unsinkable ship went down to the bottom of the ocean. Everybody also knows that King Harold was killed by a Norman arrow shot through his eye at the Battle of Hastings. Many people believe that the Roman Emperor Nero played his violin as the city of Rome burned to the ground. And every American is taught from childhood that George Washington, later to become President, chopped down a cherry tree in his garden as a boy and then owned up to his father about it.

Well, everybody knows these stories, and most of them contain at least a kernel of truth. For there was a ship's band on the "Titanic", King Harold was killed at Hastings, Rome did burn down in 64 AD and George Washington did become President of the United States. But, in every case, history and myth have become inextricably confused: the band was probably playing a tune called "Autumn", the picture of Harold with the arrow in his eye comes from the Bayeux Tapestry, made over a century later, Nero could not have played the violin as it hadn't been invented (and he was probably 30 miles away when the fire broke out). And that story of the cherry tree was invented by a minister named Mason Locke Weems in a biography of Washington published directly after his death.

As Christians, we take the Bible as our holy book, our final authority for faith. We believe that, quite apart from laws and moral principles, poetry and prophecy, it contains the history of God's dealings with humanity from prehistory over a period of nearly two thousand years. That history culminates with the story of Jesus Christ, allegedly the Son of God, who not only taught about God but performed wondrous miracles and returned to life after dying in an agonising and very public way on the cross. But the Bible is much more than that: not only does it present Jesus to us as the Saviour of the world, but in fact the whole book depicts God as an agent in the historical process. The entire story is "Salvation History", with God progressively revealing himself to humanity through events and happenings.

The question we have to ask ourselves is, "Is that history true?" I am not talking about the way we interpret it, whether we believe that certain events such as the parting of the Red Sea were really done by God or whether they happened through natural causes. What I am asking is whether these events really took place at all, or whether they were nothing more than religious myths and fables cunningly conceived to bolster up Jewish identity or to draw people into the Christian Church. I believe it is vital for us to sort this question out in our minds if we are to take the Bible at all seriously.

Well, it seems to me that there are many Christians at the extremes of this debate about myth and history. At one end of that spectrum are those who cry out, "Every word of the Bible is historical fact, it is truthful and reliable and inerrant". These are the people who get hot under the collar if you don't agree that the Genesis story is an accurate scientific account of the creation. Well, I have news for them: that simply isn't the way the Bible understands itself, as it uses myth and symbol, poetry and proverb, history and prophecy to tell its story.

And at the other end extreme are those Christians who say, "None of the Bible is historical truth, it just expresses the spiritual experiences of the disciples or the beliefs of the early Church, it looks back to a vaguely remembered person who may have been called Jesus". And I have news for this group as well: there definitely are some sections of the Bible which do ask to be taken as literal historical truth. Whether we then believe them is up to us – although I believe that we can.

Before we can start thinking about this issue of myth and history, I think we had better define exactly what we mean by those words. And I suspect that most of us would say, "Oh, that's easy. A myth is a legend of the olden days that gives us an explanation of how things came to be; but it has nothing to do with the actual facts. It is an ancient fable, the distillation of primeval wisdom. And history is the opposite: it is the objective record of what really took place, it is factually true, no-one can argue with it". But things

aren't quite so simple as that, partly because those definitions – although they contain a great deal of truth – are not actually quite right, and partly because the distinction between myth and history is nothing like as clear as we might think. In fact, they overlap and even collide.

So let us begin by considering myths – and, remember, I'm not thinking about Aesop's Fables or the Iliad or anything like that, but specifically about the Bible account. And straightaway we run into a problem; as the distinguished New Testament scholar Ian Howard Marshall says, "Myth is a confusing and slippery term in theology; it is used in so many ill-defined ways that it would be no bad thing if its use was prohibited". Well, that isn't a very promising start, is it; but perhaps we can go a bit further. And I found a Catholic definition of myth which was quite helpful.

It says, "The literary form of myth is the telling of an imaginative story using symbols to explain things beyond our human understandings and comprehension. While a myth may be imaginative, it speaks and reveals the truths of the thing it is explaining. For the audience of a myth, the reality that it speaks of is so complex and beyond understanding that the only way to properly explain the situation in the context of the world the myth is created is through the use of imagination and symbols". In other words, myth is trying to tell us something that is true: but something is so far removed from ordinary human experience that it has to be set down in story form for us to grasp it at all.

The writer J.R.R. Tolkien understood this. When his friend C.S. Lewis objected to him that, "...myths are lies, though lies breathed through silver", Tolkien disagreed. He told Lewis that there are transcendent truths about beauty, truth or honour that lie beyond us. We know that these truths exist, they are real; but they are immaterial and cannot be seen by us. The only way we can speak of them is by using the language of myth and story. Tolkien, who was a devout Catholic, believed that reading and even writing myths was a way of meditating on the most important issues of life. And, crucially, while all the other myths of the world contain a mixture of truth and error, he believed that the Bible is the one true myth which declares God correctly. This perspective was decisive in C.S. Lewis' conversion to Christianity.

But what about history? Surely we're on firmer ground here? Well, I'm not sure about that, and for several reasons. For instance, the way we understand history changes from epoch to epoch and from time to time. We in the West tend to see history in a linear way, starting from a beginning, going through the present and ending up some time in the future. That's fine, and the Bible takes a largely similar view: but many cultures see history in terms of repeating circles or cycles of events (and even we sometimes say that history has a habit of repeating itself, or "what goes round, comes round"). We have to be aware that there is more than one way of looking at time itself.

More crucially, most of us think of history as the objective recording of events. For instance, when we turn on the news each night we hope to see an unbiased reporting of what has been happening in the world over the last few hours. The medieval philosopher Francis Bacon wrote, "It is the true office of history to represent the events themselves together with the counsels and to leave the observations and conclusions thereupon to the liberty and faculty of everyone's judgement". But, in fact, history is never neutral but always subject to editing and interpretation. Each historian decides what they are going to write down and what they are going to leave out; moreover, they will have their particular thesis or axe to grind about the events that took place. Then, we must remember that most history is written by rich and literate people: the voices of the poor or the defeated are marginalised. That's why so much of the English history you did at school was about kings and queens and barons – the peasants hardly got a look in, although there were many more of them!

And of course history also has to do with memory. I am sure that every family has had the experience of sitting round a table and describing events that happened years ago. The funny thing is, Grandad will swear blind that Annie got swallowed by a whale at Clacton, while Auntie Ethel will be absolutely sure that it was at Southwold. Uncle George will be convinced that Vera fell down a manhole at Blackpool while Great-Aunt Jane has no doubt that she did it at Margate. And these stories grow over time and gain a life of their own. No less a figure than St. Augustine said that with any historic event, there is the actual occurrence and then the way in which it lingers and is embellished by our experiences. It is at this point that myth and history start overlapping in an interesting way.

So what am I saying? Am I saying that the history which the Bible purports to tell us is flawed and inaccurate, that we're better off without it? Absolutely not: our faith stands or falls on historical facts, on events which took place with real people at real times and in real places. This is especially true of the story about Jesus: I cannot agree with the theologian Rudolf Bultmann who said that our present relation to God is what is important in our faith, not historical events. Yes, of course the spiritual experience of the disciples was important, as is the presence of the living Jesus in the lives of Christians today. But if the Easter story was no more than a fable, then there would not have been a life-changing message to believe in in the first place. In fact God would almost be made out to be an accomplice in deceit!

But what I am saying is that not all the Bible is like that. For instance, I do not think that the story of creation was ever intended to be taken literally, and it is certainly not a scientific account of what took place. It stands firmly within the tradition of creation myths from the near East and other parts of the ancient world – attempts to explain the unknowable. In fact, the “big bang” theory we have all heard about is simply a creation myth which fits well with modern ways of understanding the world. And it can be harmonised perfectly with the Bible account.

Now I realised I have not answered every question this morning. In particular, I haven't even begun to talk about the reasons I have for believing that the Bible texts themselves are worth accepting. Nor have I touched the thorny ground of deciding whether some stories in the Bible – the story of Jonah is a notorious example, and the book of Job may be another – should be treated as fables or history. (For my part, I tend to look at Jonah as history and Job as myth – but who can really know? Each one of us has to make their own decision).

But what I would ask each of us to do today is this. First (and I've said this before) we need to take an intelligent approach to the Bible as a work of literature. That means putting in a bit of thought, means taking the history seriously but also allowing some bits to be myth, and treating each as they deserve.

Second, we need to recognise that the whole Bible story is salvation history and reveals God to us. That's not just the words themselves but the stories and events that they describe, it's not just the Gospel but the Old Testament as well. As Christians, we believe that all of the Bible has spiritual meaning. It's up to us – with the aid of the Holy Spirit – to quarry that meaning out for ourselves.

Third, we need to accept, despite our doubts, that the Bible is essentially a true book. But it is not objective: it wants us to read it and then to make a response to the facts and interpretations which it presents to us. In particular, it asks us to weigh up the portraits of Jesus that it gives us, and to follow him as Saviour of the world.

I once had a Church Secretary who shocked me during a Bible study group by saying, “Well, of course, you can't really believe the Bible, it's all been changed, you've got to take it all with a pinch of salt”. I didn't know how to reply to him then, but I do now. Yes, there are problems in coming to the Bible and, yes, there are problems in knowing what it means: but there are sensible answers to many of those questions. What we need to keep in mind is that the Bible is really a book of the history of the life of God relating to people. As we read it, not uncritically but carefully, that divine life can cross the gap between page and reader and find its place in our hearts. I am sure that is what God would wish.