Did It Happen? Is It True?

Historicity in the Bible

By Richard J. Clifford

Several years ago I gave a talk on the Book of Genesis to a full parish hall. After explaining that Chapters 2 to 11 are traditional stories rather than historical reports, I was confronted by an angry questioner: If these stories are fables, then what can we believe? What about Moses? What about the resurrection? Is the Bible true or isn’t it? More recently, I addressed a group of professional theologians. To my surprise, several asked the same question, though with less anguish and in different words.

This year, the 40th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council’s “Constitution on Divine Revelation” (Dei Verbum) seems a good time to reflect on the reliability of the Scriptures. Did the events they describe really happen? Are they true? Dei Verbum intends, after all, that the faithful nourish themselves on the word of God, not be confused by it.

Three Principles
First, there is no single principle of interpretation that covers all cases of disputed historicity. What one says about Adam and Eve or the flood does not necessarily apply to the Abraham stories, the exodus plagues, the mir-
acles of Jesus or the resurrection. Consequently, one need not fear a domino effect. The Bible, to use another metaphor, is not a house of cards.

Second, one must pay attention to literary type or genre. When we read a newspaper, magazine article or book, we instinctively know its genre because we are at home in our culture. We sense the difference between the sports page and the editorials, a short story and a political analysis, a textbook and a mystery novel.

Not so with the literature of the past. As L. P. Hartley wrote, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” We have to pause at the threshold of an ancient text and discover its genre; only then can we know what to expect. Obvious though this may seem, readers of the Bible often forget it. At a critical time in modern Catholic interpretation of the Bible, Pope Pius XII insisted on this very point: Interpreters must “accurately determine what modes of writing, so to speak, the authors of that ancient period would be likely to use, and in fact did use” (Divino Afflante Spiritu, No. 20).

Third, biblical authors prefer narrative over analytical reasoning; they would rather tell a story than write a treatise. Even the seemingly timeless symbols of the Bible—the divine shepherd, the city of Zion, the cross—have implied narratives that ground them and give them their power. In our culture, we tell stories to entertain or to illustrate a point. In biblical culture, thinkers did their philosophy and theology through artful storytelling.

To illustrate these three principles, I have selected one text from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

**A Controverted Old Testament Text**

Genesis 2-11 presents Adam and Eve and their sin (Ch. 2 and 3), Cain and Abel and the origin of culture (Ch. 4), a genealogy of long-lived heroes (Ch. 5), the flood and the repopulating of the earth (Ch. 6-10), the Tower of Babel (Ch. 11), and a final genealogy funneling down to Abraham. Throughout the ages, Jews and Christians have looked to these chapters to understand God’s purpose in creating the world, the nature and destiny of human beings and the root causes of sin and disorder. For much of that time, readers assumed unreflectively that the chapters were “historical,” that is, they described the actual creation of the world.

In the Renaissance period, however, the Bible, like other ancient texts, began to be subjected to critical and even skeptical scrutiny. Critics asserted that the Bible was self-contradictory and fraudulent; its defenders boldly asserted that it was “historical” because it accurately described past events. Perhaps the most memorable of such defenders was the Anglican Archbishop James Ussher, who in 1650 calculated from Genesis and other sources that God created the world on Sunday Oct. 23, 4004 B.C., beginning at sunset on the 22nd.

Ussher’s literalism lives on today only in ultra-conservative Christian and Jewish circles. Still, while most people read Genesis for its inspired theological reflections, they remain somewhat puzzled by questions of historicity: Did Adam and Eve exist? Was there a flood? Did Abraham actually live to the age of 175? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is surprisingly, and quite uncharacteristically, literalist in its analysis of these chapters. Though properly insisting on the significance of the sin of Adam “for the whole of human history,” the catechism assumes that it was “a primeval event” (No. 390).

What kind of literature is Genesis 2-11? What is its genre? Today we can confidently answer that the chapters are a “creation-flood story,” several examples of which have been found in ancient Mesopotamia (today Iraq) and elsewhere, including the Sumerian flood story, the tale of Atrahasis, Tablet XI of Gilgamesh, and an account in the work of the Greek writer Berossos. The plots of the stories are similar: the gods create a world; some kind of fault (divine or human) spoils things, with the result that the gods send a flood to destroy it; the god of wisdom alerts his client (variously named Ziusudra, Utanapishtim, Atrahasis or Noah) to build a boat and ride out the flood;
after the flood, the gods build a new world without the miscalculations that marred the first one. (In the Bible there is no divine miscalculation.)

To the biblical authors, the creation-flood story served as a narrative template for expressing their distinctive vision of God and the world. In crafting their own version, they were startlingly original, affirming that God freely created the world and gave the human race an honored place within it, that humans represent (that is, "image") God in the world, and that God honors humans' faithfulness and punishes their sins.

The chapters are not, therefore, historical in the sense that the events recounted therein actually occurred. They offer, rather, an inspired story of origins, a narrative exploration of profound questions undertaken by speaking of the first appearance of human realities and institutions.

A Controverted New Testament Text

Then [Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, raised his hands, and blessed them. As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God.


The historicity of the resurrection of Jesus is a modern disputed question. Luke 24:50-53 can raise problems for modern readers not only because it describes the resurrection (in its "ascension" aspect), but also because it differs from Luke's other account of the ascension in Acts 1:9-11. Can we trust the text?

By modern standards of history writing, Jesus' ascent to glory at the Father's right hand is indescribable, in that it transcends human history. Seemingly sensing this, Luke sought "non-historical" means to depict it. In Elijah's ascension in a whirlwind in 2 Kings he found a useful scriptural analogy. "The Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven" (2 Kgs 2:1) before he goes, Elijah grants his disciple Elijah's request, "May I receive a double portion of your spirit?" (2:9). The venerable event of Elijah being "taken up" becomes a way to validate the event of Jesus' ascension. It also serves as a means to interpret the new event's significance. As Brendan Byrne explains in The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel (2000), Jesus' "personal ministry on earth comes to an end.... But his power and presence will continue on the earth when in due course the Spirit empowers his disciples to take up his mission." By drawing on the story of Elijah, Luke underscores the giving of the Spirit to the disciples. Byrne con-

continues: "This is what the otherwise fantastic episode of the ascension signals to readers steeped in the biblical tradition. Here, at least, are we dealing with a narrative purporting to depict a historical event."

As noted, Luke's other account of the ascension, in Acts 1:9-11, tells a different story. Instead of the ascension taking place on the same day as the resurrection, as in Luke 24:50-53, the ascension takes place after 40 days. Why the discrepancy? I suggest that the differences are the result of Luke employing different scriptural traditions for different aims. Acts uses the symbolic number 40, the number of years Israel spent in the wilderness preparing to enter the Promised Land. This allusion suggests that Jesus had prepared his disciples for living in a new stage of the divine plan, the time of the church. The Gospel, on the other hand, is intent on the outpouring of the Spirit that enables the disciples to do what the master did. In both versions, Luke is not writing history in the modern sense but aligning the new event with venerable Old Testament stories so as to validate and interpret that new event. He freely selects, omits and alters details—all to help his audience understand what the ascension means for them.

Suggestions

Historicity is not the same as biblical truth. The historicity of events in the Bible must be judged case by case. How should preachers and teachers handle biblical texts that might invite puzzlement or even skepticism from a congregation? I offer the following suggestions.

• Focus on "what the sacred author intended," as the 1964 Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels insisted. An excellent illustration of this principle is the liturgical introduction to the Gospel, "A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke." "According to" says much in two words.

• When teaching a difficult text, inform your audience immediately what kind of text it is (its genre). In teaching Genesis 2-11, for example, one might say, "Today we will look at some 'stories of origin,' which people of the time used to explore fundamental questions such as God's purpose in creating, how divine justice operates in an often sinful world and what the grounds of hope are in such a world." Further explanation is probably not necessary.

• In preaching on the Resurrection, make clear that human language can express only partially a stupendous act that transcends ordinary history. To explore its significance more fully, the sacred writers used analogies from the Scriptures (the Old Testament) to validate and interpret this new event, and employed their expository skills with the primary aim of eliciting wonder and faith in their hearers.