Biblical Narratives and Novelists' Narratives
My first duty this evening is to thank the chairman for his generous introduction. My second is to say how conscious I am of the distinction of the Biblical scholars, theologians, and historians who have preceded me as Ethel M. Wood lecturer. To follow them, and to do so as an outsider to the disciplines they professed, is a peculiarly onerous task. Hence the subject I have chosen. It is one on which - as a novelist and as a number of a university department of literature - I hope to be able to speak with neither timidity nor temerity.

Let me open forthwith by reading to you three fictions based on biblical themes. Only one of them is actually written by a novelist: this fact being in itself a part of the argument I want to present; or an illustration of the pattern of continuities and discontinuities I am concerned with. The first of the stories is taken from the volume on Exodus in the Midrash Rabbah, a compilation of rabbinic exegeses, annotations, and elaborations on various books of the Bible, which was finally put together, it is believed, some time in the early Middle Ages. The particular text to which the following tale refers is Ex. 2. 10; it tells how the infant Moses, having been saved from death by Pharaoh's daughter, is later brought up in the king's household.

Pharaoh's daughter used to kiss and hug him, loved him as if he were her own son and would not allow him out of the royal palace. Because he was so handsome, everyone was eager to see him, and whoever saw him could not tear himself away from him. Pharaoh also used to kiss and hug him, and he [Moses] used to take the crown of Pharaoh and place it upon his own head, as he was destined to do when he became great. It was this which God said to Miriam: Therefore have I brought forth a fire from the midst of thee (Ezek. 28.18); and even so did the daughter of Pharaoh bring up him who was destined to exact retribution from her father ... The magicians of Egypt sat there and said: 'We are afraid of him who is taking off thy crown and placing it upon his own head, lest he be the one of whom we prophesy that he will take away the kingdom from thee.' Some of them counselled to slay him and others to burn him, but Jethro was present among them and he said to them: 'This boy has no sense. However, test him by placing before him a gold vessel and a live coal; if he stretch forth his hand for the gold, then he has sense and you can slay him, but if he make for the live coal, then he has no sense and there can be no sentence of death upon him.' So they brought these things before him, and he was about to reach forth for the gold when [the angel] Gabriel came and thrust his hand aside so that it seized the coal, and thrust his hand with the live coal into his mouth, so that his tongue was burnt, so that he became slow of speech and tongue.¹

Several points in the tale call at once for comment. Perhaps the most obvious of these are the mythic or fairy-tale elements in it. We recognise, for example, the foundling who will eventually displace those who have given him succour: a theme which is found in the widest imaginable variety of literary contexts. (Shades of Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights!) A comparable motif is that of the child or adult who, as a result of preternatural cunning or assistance from some unexpected source, makes the right choice among a group of objects offered to him. (Shades of Bassanio in The Merchant of Venice!) The passage is also much preoccupied, as such tales often are, with the irresistible physical beauty and charm of the chosen hero: because he is chosen by God or fate, the people around him choose to love him, too. Or rather, they are compelled to do so; they have no choice in the matter.
There are other elements in the tale which, though hardly 'deeper' than those I have just spoken of, are of a different kind. Notice, for instance, the way in which the synchronicity of the entire biblical text is brought about. In Vethro, whom Moses goes to greet, we meet much later in the Land of Midian, and whose daughter he is to marry, turns out to be a familiar and important figure in the court of Pharaoh. An even more startling, and, in view of this mode of conceiving time, a much less relevant, is the quoting by the God of Israel to Miriam, Moses' sister, of a passage from the Book of Ezekiel - which we know to have been composed some thousand years after Moses may be supposed to have led the people of Israel out of Egypt. To this habit of mind - one to which our notions of chronology and succession are wholly irrelevant - we may also assimilate certain disturbing, echoic effects which are to be found in the passage. I am thinking particularly here of the instant recourse by Pharaoh's magicians to the proposal that the infant Moses be slain. This inevitably harks back to the edict that all the male children of the Israelites should be killed, and forward to the last of the curses which God was to visit on the Egyptians. For a Christian reader that particular reference is bound to carry farther forward still: to Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents. And as for the coal of fire placed in the infant's mouth - well, to that I shall be returning shortly.

I turn now to the second of my fictions; one written in circumstances remote from those which the rabbis had known. It is taken from Søren Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling, first published in Copenhagen in 1843.

It was early in the morning, Abraham rose betimes, he embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who had taken away her reproach, who was her pride, her hope for all time. So silence along the way, and Abraham's glance was fixed upon the ground until the fourth day when he lifted up his eyes and saw afar off Mount Moriah, but his glance turned again to the ground. Silently he drew the knife - then he saw the cam which God had prepared. Then he offered that and returned home... From that time on Abraham became old, he could not forget that God had required this of him. Isaac throne as before, but Abraham's eyes were darken, and he knew joy no more.

This re-telling of the story of the Binding of Isaac is in fact the second of four which Kierkegaard relates successively at the beginning of his book. In the first of the tales we are told that before seeing Isaac, Abraham makes himself hideous and declares himself to be an idolator; it is so that Isaac will never know that it was the true God, the God of Israel, who was demanding this terrible sacrifice from them both. In the third of the tales, Abraham turns not against God, as he has done in the one I have just read, but against himself: how could he, Abraham, ever have brought himself to carry out such a deed? And in the fourth reworking of the story it is indeed Isaac who turns out ultimately to be the victim of the sacrifice, in that he, the one whose faith is lost or spoiled. 'No word of this,' Kierkegaard wrote, 'has ever been spoken in the world' - no word, that is, until he himself, the nineteenth century seeker after faith, dared to speak it. It is supposed to be difficult to understand Hegel, he remarks, a few pages later, 'but to understand Abraham is a trifle.'

My final example is from Thomas Mann, who is indisputably a novelist, and one acknowledged to be among this century's masters of the form. The passage I am going to quote does not come from the great tetralogy, Joseph and His Brothers, which Mann himself (who was not given to excessive modesty) compared in scale and bulk to an Egyptian pyramid. (He added, just in case we missed the point, that this pyramid, his pyramid, was built: not by the labour of thousands, but by that of one man.) My example comes from a short story, 'The Tables of the Law', which was written after the Joseph novels, but which came clearly out of the same creative urge as that which had produced the longer works. It is relevant to add that in devoting himself to a set of novels based on Hebraic themes, the self-exiled Thomas Mann - a German of the Germans - was quite consciously issuing a challenge to those who ruled his country's time, and to the concepts of German and European history which they were attempting to impose on the world.

When he [Moses] spoke he had a certain way of letting his arms hang limp at his sides, while his fists shook and trembled. He informed them that the God of their Fathers was found again... This God was called Jahwe, which name is to be understood as 'I am that I am, from eternity to eternity', but also as flowing air and mighty sound. This God was inclined towards their tribe and was ready under certain conditions to enter into a covenant with them, choosing them above all other peoples... Moses stomared at them and the fists on his broad wrists trembled. Yet he was not completely honest with them, and kept under cover much, indeed the essential thought, that was in his mind. Fearing that he might scare them off he said nothing of the implications of invisibility, that is its spirituality, its purity, its holiness... Afraid to frighten them he kept silent... When he announced to them that Jahwe the Invisible was inclined towards them, he really was inclined towards the God ascribed to the God and interpreted for the God what was possibly true for the God but was certainly true for him: for he himself was inclined towards his father's kin, as the sculptor is inclined towards the shapeless lump from which he hopes to carve a high and fine figure, the work of his hands. Hence his trembling desire, hence too the great heaviness of soul which filled him directly after his departure from Midian...

Was it however that his speech displeased the people - for he spoke badly and not meaningly and often did not understand what they divine, while he shook his trembling fists, the implications of invisibility as well as those of the covenant? Did they perceive that they were being lured towards strenuousness and dangerous matters? Whatever the reason they remained mistrustful, stiff-necked, and fearful of his storming. They ogled their Egyptian whipmasters and mumbled between their teeth.

Why do you spout words? And what kind of words are these you spout? Likely somebody set you up as chief or judge over us? Well, we want to know who.

Now I have deliberately taken my three fictions from writings which are strikingly different in intention, and in attitude both to the material they are presenting and to the source of that material. They differ above all, and crucially, in the attitudes to the faith they seek to express or explore or bring into doubt. To think oneself back into the frame of mind of the rabbis is extremely difficult; perhaps impossible for someone brought up, as I was, completely cut off from their intellectual and devotional traditions. However, anyone attempting to the tale I read a few minutes ago would probably agree, at the very least, that the writers of it have an intimacy with their own faith, and hence a relaxed confidence in it, despite all the pain they are familiar with, that is quite unlike
what is to be found in Kierkegaard. In contemplating the Binding of Isaac, Kierkegaard is trying to develop and illustrate the concept of dread, which he makes peculiarly his own: a condition which (for him) is evoked almost as intensely by the necessity of belief as it is by the temptation of unbelief. His aim is not to make a commitment to faith easier for his readers, but just the reverse of this; he wants his readers to feel the perils of atavism so that they are therefore likely to be. Hence his insistence, which perhaps falls strangely on our ears, on being made man sleepless, and yet Abraham is not what he is without this dread.7

When we turn to Mann, by contrast, we find ourselves in the company of a consummate ironist and sceptic. Above all other writers Nietzsche is the one whose influence we feel at work in almost everything Mann wrote; the Nietzsche who taught that all values and indeed all gods are relative, man-made, history-bound. They are the products of needs, and also (once they are established) themselves the generators of needs, which can neither be evaded nor wholly articulated, and which are therefore constantly undergoing processes of change and fracture, displacement and inversion. When Mann writes of Moses' teachings that they were 'possibly the best testimony against the possibility of testimony;' but precisely in this contradiction consists the dread which can well make a man sleepless, and yet Abraham is not what he is without this dread.8

The ethical expression for what Abraham did, is that he would murder Isaac. This profoundly ambiguous expression is the writer's ironical leitmotiv; but precisely in this contradiction consists the dread which can well make a man sleepless, and yet Abraham is not what he is without this dread.7

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to be hard, for instance, for a believer to understand that it might be
the unbelief of a novelist like Mann which irresistibly attracts him to
the records of an ancient faith; part of their allure for him is that
they will seem to have the power to test him, intellectually and morally,
as nothing else can. By the same token, however, a lesser novelist
who approaches the biblical texts from without, as a stranger to the spirit
which possesses them, may find it hard to preserve his unbelief from
the taint of cynicism and vulgarity, or worse. Of one thing we can be sure:
the novelist's response to the Bible, or any part of it, will reveal him
for what he is to the judgement of his readers, believers and sceptics
alike; and he is hardly in a position to feel aggrieved if the former
should sometimes express their judgement with a more-than-aesthetic
exactitude, the gloating anticipation of the enemy. Step by step the
verse rehearses the attack which never took place - the pursuit
initially, then the overtaking, then the act of plunder, and finally the
frenzy of the physical destruction of the intended victims. What if - ?
indeed!

Precisely because they have such confidence in the indefeasible veracity
of the larger, overarching story they are telling, they are able to grant
accompanying smaller stories, each of which constantly assumes and resumes its
entire past, or that which it claims to be its past, and points to an end
which is yet to come. (In the Hebrew Scriptures the fate of Israel is the
paramount issue throughout, and all historical events are seen as merely
instrumental to that fate; in the Christian scriptures Israel itself, the
historic Israel, has in its turn become merely instrumental to the
proclamation of the new faith - and hence of what is declared to be a new
Israel.) At the same time, these large unfolding and infolding narratives
are themselves for the most part composed of innumerable smaller stories,
in which delighted and skilful use is made of all the resources of the
story-teller's art. Plot and characterisation; description and dialogue;
the giving of information and the deliberate withholding of it; ironic
digression and juxtaposition; metaphor, analogy, framing devices - all
these, and much else, as several sophisticated literary critics have
latterly been demonstrating to us, are cunningly deployed in what might
appear to be even the simplest of Biblical tales.

All of which leads us to conclude that the 'What if - ?' spirit of which
I have been speaking, the spirit of imaginative speculation and self-
projection, out of which all our richest fictions, in all ages, have
emerged, is by no means as irreconcilable as it might seem to be with the
biblical writers' conception of their task as sacred historians.

Precisely because they have such confidence in the indefeasible veracity of the larger, overarching story they are telling, they are able to grant an autonomy, a dramatic presence, a psychological inwardness and coherence, to all or any of the participators in their tales; or at least those participants who are to be seen to be on the wrong side; who are misguided or downright evil; who are to be opposed and fought and ultimately defeated. By the same token, they are able to show weakness and temptation at work in the hearts of those who are ultimately to triumph. By what other means could the narrative skills referred to a moment ago be made manifest; how else could the writers contrive the suspense and surprise which no story can do without?

Let me give you just one small example of the kind of thing I have in
mind. The fact that my example comes not from one of the biblical tales
but from the hymn of praise uttered by the Israelites after the drowning
of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea is not disadvantageous to my
argument; on the contrary, it reveals how deeply embedded in the minds of the biblical writers are the narrative and dramatic impulses of which I have just been trying to speak. The passage is from Exodus 15:9.

The enemy said: I will pursue, I will overtake, I will
divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I
will draw my sword, my sword shall destroy them.

Safe on dry land, triumphant, relieved - or imagining himself to be so,
in historical retrospect - the psalmist re-enacts the fate that has been
escaped; and he does so by imagining, with an extraordinary zeal and
exactitude, the gloating anticipation of the enemy. Step by step the
verse rehearses the attack which never took place - the pursuit
initially, then the overtaking, then the act of plunder, and finally the
frenzy of the physical destruction of the intended victims. What if -?
indeed!

Innumerable commentaries have no doubt been devoted to that passage in
the millennia that have passed since it was first put into writing. I
suspect, though, that it has never been called 'novelistic' before. But
that is exactly what it is, in its horrified and yet jubilant movement
into the mind of the other, of the opposing partner in the drama it is
enacting. And if I am challenged yet further to define what I mean here
by novelistic, I shall do so by invoking for the last time the non-
novelist, Kierkegaard:

It is repugnant to me to do as is so often done, namely, to speak
inhumanly about a great deed, as though some thousands of years were
an immense distance; I would rather speak humanly about it, as
though it had occurred yesterday, letting only its greatness be the
distance.

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NOTES:

3. Ibid. p.29.
4. Ibid. p.43.