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By modern standards, many if not most stories in the Bible are either fiction or legend with at best a modicum of truth. This has been known for a long time. In 1830 David Friedrich Strauss, following the ideas of the philosopher Hegel, made the first very public statement that the Bible, including the Christian gospels, were mythological writings, not modern history. Strauss, of course, got into a lot of trouble.

We can make a lengthy list of things that never happened in the Bible. The list tells us, or should tell us, exactly what Strauss was saying: The Bible is not history and should not be consulted to determine facts.

- There was never a Garden of Eden
- No one ever lived to the ripe old age of 900
- Jacob did not have 12 sons who became the founders of 12 tribes
- The Exodus never happened
- Israel and Judah were never a united Empire under David and Solomon

That list is just a start, but to be fair, I'll name a few things that never happened from the Christian New Testament.

- Jesus did not turn water into wine
- Jesus was not born of a virgin
- Jesus did not rise from the grave after his death
- Paul did not have three missionary journeys
- Jesus never said that Peter was the rock upon whom the Church would be founded.

When modern biblical criticism is used, criticism that identifies sources, understands rhetoric, and relies on archaeology freed from dogma, an incredible number of things the Bible claims to be true become things the Bible is making up.

The question is, is there any value to things that never happened? I am going to answer that question with yes because I am going to distinguish between facts and story, between science and humanism. The value of mythology – stories about things that never happened – does not lie in scientific verifiability but in humanistic value. Things that never happened do not teach us facts. They teach us wisdom.

II

David Friedrich Strauss made a distinction between modern critical history and ancient legendary history. The point of history for most historians is to speak of legends. Only in the 19th century, with the rise of scientific method, did history become a critical discipline. History as a critical discipline employs scientific methodology to describe events, methods such as contextual criticism, redaction criticism, source criticism, rhetorical criticism, textual criticism, grammatical criticism, and several others. Until the 19th century these types of methodological criticism did not exist. Before that time, most often history was about legendary accounts of the past. Historians, of course, always had their doubts, but the use of methodological doubt is something quite recent.

We still use history in legendary ways. When in the U.S. election the slogan “Make America Great Again” was used, the appeal was to legendary history, to an America that never existed except in the

mythological mindset of Americans. Greatness is always the stuff of legend. The idea exists because human beings have a hard time accepting the fact of our humanity, the fact that we all are born, will grow old, get sick, and die, and the fact that 100,000 years from today nothing we do now will matter all that much. It's hard to accept that and to live in peace with that knowledge, but legendary history helps us think that things are far more significant than they really are.

This does not mean that legendary history is useless or deceiving. It does play a role, but its role is not the role of critical or scientific history. Its role is found in humanism, in the value of things that never happened but that still influence how we live and how we mature in life.

III

There are a few people in theology and philosophy that got this point very well and could speak both about the value of things that are not and the value of things that never happened.

Plato talked about the Good. Plato claimed that everything we do should be directed toward the Good, for everything seeks its fulfillment in the Good. But does the Good exist? No! The Good is a myth, and when Plato talks about the Good, he invariably does so through a myth like the Myth of the Cave and the Myth of the Line. Plato uses myth to imagine what is noble. His myths do not describe reality, and the Good that he relays in myth does not really exist. His point is to critique the life we live now, to challenge our lives now, with something inspiring that calls us to live better. We will never be good, but the idea of the Good can help us be better.

In theology, Paul Tillich distinguished between the conditional and the unconditional. The conditional refers to the actual circumstances of our lives. We can never be objective because we live in conditions. We belong to a country, we speak a language, we only have so much knowledge, we are prejudiced in various ways, etc. We always live in and with conditions. We are always limited. But we still need the idea of the unconditional. The unconditional comes to us in ideas like justice, love, goodness, and equality. We can never live out these ideas in our lives, but unless we hold those ideas as the promise of life, we will never be capable of changing. In other words, Tillich is saying, there is no hope in life unless there are things that never happen.

The philosopher Jacques Derrida held the same idea, but in place of the unconditional Derrida used the expression the undeconstructible. Our lives are deconstructible. That means, every truth that we may believe can be broken apart and shown to be partial. Things that we believe always emerge from a context, and every context can be broken apart, deconstructed, to show that it is false, partial, not the truth. However, there are things undeconstructible. These are things that do not actually exist. The undeconstructible calls to things deconstructible as the voice of God – who also does not exist. Justice calls to the law, demands that the laws be just. But laws are human creations that are often not just. Laws are deconstructible. Deconstructible laws need the idea of undeconstructible justice in order to work, to change, and to move forward. Something that does not exist is very important for what does exist.

You can see where I'm going. All the things that never happened in the Bible still express the value of religion. The Exodus never happened, but it is the story of our life. The Resurrection never happened, but it is the inspiration to try again. The things that never happened factually always and necessarily need to happen mythically. We just need to be careful what myth we use to develop our humanity.