

Gospel Narrative and the Jesus of History: Where should Christology begin?

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Abstract: The prevailing tendency to make a reconstruction of the historical life of Jesus the starting point for christology runs into two serious difficulties. First, such reconstructions vary greatly among themselves and are largely precarious in what they claim to know about Jesus. Secondly, resting upon the historical-critical method, the adequacy of which in theological terms has now come into serious question, they fail to do justice to the narrative quality of the gospels, which resists simple reduction to history. This article critically surveys the work of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, David Kelsey, Luke Timothy Johnson and Francis Watson and formulates seven principles attempting to state the appropriate relationship between the gospels and history with regard to christology. It concludes that the starting point for christology must be the canonical gospels. Four related issues are addressed at the end: first the openness of a text to multiple meaning; then three concerns arising, respectively, out of liberation theology, feminist interpretation, and the anti-Jewish slant of the gospels.

IT IS NO SECRET THAT THE STARTING POINT of christology has moved from emphasis upon the humanity of the Son of God conceived in abstract terms to the historical reality of Jesus' human life. The pattern of his life, his teaching, aims and characteristic behaviour, the conflicts in which he was engaged, his fate and the attitude he adopted towards its likely realisation: all these now form the starting point for christology. There is no need to labour this point. It has been amply catalogued by John P. Galvin in a recent survey.¹

Paradoxically, however, this renewed christological interest in the historical Jesus comes at a time when historical construction of the pattern of Jesus' life has never been more controversial. The "Third Quest for the Historical Jesus" has been under way for nearly two decades.²

1. John P. Galvin, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Jesus of History: A Paradigm Shift in Catholic Christology", *Theological Studies* 55 (1994) 252-73. In this connection Galvin mentions the work of W. Kasper, H. Küng, G. O'Collins, the later K. Rahner, E. Schillebeeckx, R. Schwager, B. McDermott and Liberation theologians such as J. L. Segundo and J. Sobrino. One could now add R. Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999): see esp. 48-49, 55-60.

2. The description "Third Quest" seems to have been coined by the British scholar, N. T. (Tom) Wright; see Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (2nd ed.; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 379. For a

Its chief inspiration and point of distinction from its predecessors (the "First Quest" of the nineteenth century, upon which A. Schweitzer pronounced his notable verdict; the post-Bultmannian "Second [or "New"] Quest" launched by E. Käsemann in the 1960s) has been the setting of Jesus within rather than over against (as in the "Second Quest") his Jewish environment, an environment constructed with far greater confidence through the discovery of new evidence (archaeological and textual), through the application of insights from the social sciences (notably sociology and anthropology) and also through serious collaboration with contemporary Jewish scholarship. We now know a lot more about the world of Jesus. On the basis of that knowledge we can give greater credence in historical terms to the presentation of Jesus in the gospels. The range of what we know about him with a strong degree of probability (for example, that he proclaimed the "Rule of God"; that he addressed God as "Abba") has expanded. But the little we can know with *certainty* about Jesus has advanced very little, if at all.³ Moreover, the bewildering variety of the reconstructions offered⁴ does little to undermine Schweitzer's famous observation that questers of the historical Jesus inevitably end up with a Jesus reflecting their own ideologies.⁵ The new movement in christology, therefore, would seem to be resting upon shaky and shifting foundations.⁶

The situation becomes even more complex when one takes into account the extent to which the historical-critical approach in the interpretation of the gospels has fallen into jeopardy.⁷ All "Quests" for the

comprehensive summary and critical review of works representative of the Third Quest, see *ibid.* 379-403; B. Chilton and C. A. Evans (eds.), *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (NTTS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 1-74 (survey articles by C. E. Carlston, M. J. Borg and W. R. Telford); B. Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (New expanded edition; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997); C. A. Evans, *Life of Jesus Research: An Annotated Bibliography* (NTTS 24; rev. ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1996); Mark Alan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

3. See M. Cahill, "An Uncertain Jesus: Theological and Scholarly Ambiguities", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 63 (1998) 22-38.

4. See Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, *passim*.

5. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (German original 1906; ET New York: Macmillan, 1910; repr. 1968) 4.

6. J. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993 [Spanish original 1991]) takes this question carefully into consideration: "(Latin American christology)...does not share the scepticism of previous periods, and think it is impossible to know anything about Jesus, but it accepts some fundamental data, which allow us access to the basic structure of Jesus' life, about which there seems today to be a consensus" (61). Sobrino goes on to note that Latin American christology adds to the a priori criteria used to determine historicity of various aspects of Jesus' life an a posteriori conviction that things were very plausibly "like that" born out of a sense of structural similarity between the situation of Jesus and that of the Latin America out of which this christology emerges (61-62).

7. For a lively (and resistant) account of this, see the essay of J. Barton, "Historical-critical approaches", in J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 9-20.

historical Jesus rely principally upon this method. Its prime characteristic, going back to its Enlightenment origins, is the reconstruction of the history behind the text. In “diachronic” mode, it probes the text to arrive at a description of the community from which it issued and to give an account of the sources and traditions lying behind it. Subjecting these traditions to an array of criteria (“criteria of authenticity”), it seeks to assess what elements within them it is possible to ascribe to Jesus with some degree of confidence.

In so far as it limits itself to history, the legitimacy of the method is not called into question. What has become contentious is the degree to which, if at all, the method should operate in the interpretation of the biblical texts precisely as “scripture”; that is, what role, if any, it should play in biblical interpretation conceived of primarily as a theological enterprise. Representative of the minimalist position in this regard would be Luke Timothy Johnson, who in his 1996 work *The Real Jesus*⁸ made the “Jesus Seminar” a particular object of attack. In a more recent essay Johnson has gone so far as to say, “There is no intrinsic reason why historical reconstruction of the past should have any impact upon theology.”⁹

Closely connected with this is an issue arising out of the nature of the gospels precisely as such. Viewed from a theological perspective as canonical narratives, the gospels purport to draw those who read or hear them into ever greater involvement with the presence and power of Jesus as risen Lord. Granted the nature of the gospels as narratives of this kind, one may ask whether it is appropriate to use them primarily as windows through which the Jesus of history and his world may be glimpsed. Should one not rather stop at the narrative precisely as such, allowing it to imprint its irreducible meaning?

In 1974 Hans W. Frei brought this issue to a head in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*,¹⁰ a work that soon became a classic in the field. Frei maintained that biblical interpretation took a fundamentally wrong turn when, in response to stimulus from the Enlightenment at the close of the eighteenth century, it conceptually split the literal meaning of a biblical narrative from its historical reference, making the latter the measure of the former. Biblical narratives, Frei insisted, have their own meaning, irreducible to something other than the text. This suggests that theology should not seek to go “behind” the gospels to find the Jesus of history. As narratives, the gospels do not properly give us access to this Jesus.

Thus, not only is there a problem with the reconstruction of the historical Jesus (the problem attending all the “Quests”). The literary

8. Subtitle: *The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

9. “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines”, *Modern Theology* 14 (1998) 165-80, at 169.

10. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974).

and theological appropriateness of going through and “behind” the gospels to construct a history of Jesus comes under question.

It is not my intention to review the state of the question regarding “history of Jesus” research.¹¹ This article will focus upon the issue just indicated: the appropriateness, granted the nature of the gospels, of seeking in christology to go behind them to the Jesus of history. I propose to submit to critical review the tendency inaugurated by Frei in an attempt to establish to what degree, if any, the gospels point to the Jesus of history. My thesis will be that, while a reference to history does enter into the meaning of the gospels, the historical minimum they require for credibility falls far below what is normally assumed. While this minimum is sufficient for credibility, the precarious nature of any historical reconstruction seeking to go beyond it, along with literary (the narrative cast) and theological considerations, suggests that the starting point of christology should be the canonical gospels. The (historical) Jesus attained *through* the gospels should not be played off against the Jesus communicated *in* the gospels. Following the formulation of this in a series of seven principles, I shall then briefly address difficulties that might be urged against this thesis from four angles – first a general concern that it is too restrictive, then concerns flowing from three interpretive standpoints: that of liberation theology, that of feminist criticism, and that particularly sensitive to negative portrayals of Judaism.

1. BIBLICAL NARRATIVE FROM HANS FREI TO LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

Hans W. Frei’s intention in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* was to expose the fundamental shift in biblical interpretation that occurred in the context of the Enlightenment and its preoccupation with history. Prior to this development there was no split between the literal meaning of a biblical narrative and its historical reference; the true historical reference of a story was a direct and natural concomitant of its making literal sense. Secondly, the pre-Enlightenment Christian tradition managed to establish one great cumulative biblical story without injury to the literal meaning of individual narratives. It did so by making earlier biblical stories figures or types of later stories. This figural interpretation of the Old Testament enabled the total biblical collection to be viewed as a unitary canon proclaiming a single unitary story in which – and this is Frei’s third point – the whole of human history was grasped within the unfolding action and design of God.¹²

What began to happen towards the close of the eighteenth century, in Frei’s analysis, was the reversal of all this. Meaning and historical reference were distinguished in such a way that the latter became the

11. For this see the works cited in n. 2 above.

12. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 1-3.

measure of the former: the question as to whether the events reported in biblical narratives really happened or not now entered essentially into the assessment of meaning. This led in turn to the discrediting of the figural interpretation whereby the unity and credibility of the canon had been achieved. Moreover, where previously the non-biblical human world had been fitted into the great biblical story created by the unitary canon, now there took place a notable reversal. The non-biblical historical world was the real world. The biblical stories had to fit into this world and whatever truth they contained had to be measured against it.¹³ If history or archaeology showed that the walls of Jericho did not fall down – or perhaps were not even standing at the time they were supposed to have fallen down – then so much the worse for the veracity and meaning of the biblical story.¹⁴

The error in all this for Frei is the failure to discern that, while biblical narratives such as the gospels can be, and in fact are, “history-like”, this does not imply that their meaningfulness in a literal sense depends upon their historical veracity. History-like narratives have a meaning of their own that is simply irreducible to something beyond themselves – whether that something be an abstract idea or a particular historical reference.¹⁵

As the subtitle suggests, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* is ostensibly a historical study of developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, Frei’s prime concern was with theology rather than history. There is a clear implication throughout the work that a wrong turn was taken and that biblical interpretation and theology must assess the damage incurred and see to appropriate remedies. By insisting upon the irreducibility of narrative and the primacy of the biblical over the non-biblical “world”, Frei set a provocative agenda for biblical interpretation and theology.¹⁶

Frei’s approach to scripture exercised a strong influence upon his Yale colleague, George A. Lindbeck. In his 1984 work, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*,¹⁷ Lindbeck proposed a “cultural-linguistic” approach to religion.¹⁸ Here theology operates “intra-textually” in the sense that the meaning is not located in objective realities outside the text. On the contrary, canonical texts create a world of meaning in which believers seek to live their lives and understand

13. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 4-10.

14. This “Jericho” image is mine, not Frei’s.

15. See Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 11-16.

16. In his stress upon the irreducibility of narrative Frei is at one with the contemporary narrative critical approach to the Bible. However, where Frei’s main impulse was theological, more significant in the development of narrative criticism has been the influence of modern and postmodern literary criticism.

17. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

18. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 17-18.

reality. The task of interpreters is to help believers extend this scriptural world of meaning over the whole of reality – so that the text absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.¹⁹ In this perspective, the gospels, as realistic narratives, utilise the interaction of purpose and circumstance to “render the identity” of Jesus as an agent. “It is thus his identity, not his historicity, existential significance or metaphysical status that is the controlling meaning of the tale”.²⁰ The function of the *total* canonical narrative (the total biblical “story”) is to render a character, offer an identity description of an agent, namely God, through accounts of the interaction of God’s deeds and purposes with those of creatures in their everchanging circumstances. Jesus is the climax of all this.²¹

This intra-textual mode of interpretation differs from the pre-critical (pre-Enlightenment) mode. It distinguishes between realistic narratives and historical or scientific descriptions. The Bible is often “history-like” even when it is not “likely history”. It can be taken seriously as a delineation of the character of divine and human agents, even when its history or science is challenged. In this for Lindbeck it resembles the parables of Jesus: a parable such as that of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) can render God’s character quite independently of the historical facticity of the story it tells.²²

This approach to biblical narrative characterises the work of the Catholic exegete Luke Timothy Johnson. As already noted, Johnson’s main target has been the “Jesus” Seminar, the pretensions and methods of which he lampoons in *The Real Jesus*.²³ Even more centrist historical scholars such as Raymond Brown and John P. Meier come in for criticism, albeit in milder and more respectful tones. More recently, Johnson has lent support to the growing tendency in biblical interpretation and theology to decry the whole historical-critical approach to the Bible that has reigned virtually unchallenged in biblical studies since the Enlightenment established history as the primary paradigm of critical inquiry.²⁴

Critical response to Johnson has understandably concentrated upon the polemical tone of his work.²⁵ This has deflected attention away from the considered alternative approach to the gospels developed in

19. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 113-17.

20. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 120.

21. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 121.

22. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 122. Behind this sense of scriptural narrative, “rendering the character” of a divine agent (God or Jesus) independently of the history they recount, would seem to lie a Barthian approach to the gospels, as described by David Kelsey: see *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 45.

23. See n. 8 above.

24. See “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines” (n. 9 above) 168-71.

25. See especially R. J. Miller, “History Is Not Optional: A Response to THE REAL JESUS by Luke Timothy Johnson”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 (1998) 27-34.

The Real Jesus once Johnson has finished with the Jesus Seminar.²⁶ Johnson has nothing against the historical investigation into the life of Jesus as such, provided that the limitations attending such an exercise be owned and respected.²⁷ There is a certain amount concerning Jesus that we can know from careful examination of outsider and insider sources with an impressively high level of probability.²⁸ What Johnson decries is the application of any such reconstruction of Jesus to theology. Not only is it difficult to extract much history with any certainty from the gospels but anything we do learn tends to collapse without the narrative framework they provide.²⁹ Moreover, Christian faith, even though it has always involved some historical claims concerning Jesus, has never been based on historical reconstructions of his life. Christian faith rests upon religious claims concerning the present power of Jesus as risen Lord.³⁰ The “real Jesus” of Christian faith is the resurrected Jesus, a figure of the present, not the past.³¹ Any attempt to take as a norm of faith a reconstruction of the historical Jesus without reference to the resurrection as the most important reality about Jesus is a betrayal of the essential thrust of the gospels.³² What Johnson pleads for is the return of scripture, away from the academy and its preoccupation with history, to an ecclesial setting where once again believers can “inhabit” the world scripture “imagines” and so come under the transformative power of the risen Lord.³³

2. THE QUESTIONS ARISING

With this latter plea the movement against history as a significant element in biblical interpretation appears to have reached its climax. It neatly focuses the questions central to this paper. We may formulate these questions as follows. (1) To what extent does the truth mediated by the gospels depend upon the veracity of the history they appear to describe? (For example, to what extent does the truth mediated by the narrative contained in John 11 depend upon whether Jesus really did or did not call forth from the grave a man named Lazarus who had been

26. See Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 81-166.

27. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 81-112.

28. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 111-12. The survey of sources on pp. 112-24 fills out this statement with respect to content.

29. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 125-26.

30. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 133.

31. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 141-42.

32. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 146; Johnson’s point here is essentially that made by Martin Kähler a century ago in his influential essay, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (translated and edited with an Introduction by Carl E. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964); see 65-66.

33. See “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines” at 172-73. Johnson insists that he is not proposing here a flight from everyday reality but rather the constitution of an alternative reality, which does not compete with the worlds of science and philosophy but seeks to see them within an essential reference to God as Creator.

dead for four days?) (2) To what extent should historical-critical reconstruction of the "facts" concerning Jesus bear upon theology? The two questions are distinct but closely connected. If one answers, "Not at all" to the first, then it would seem logical to answer with an equally firm "Not at all" to the second (the position of Johnson). To answer "Quite a lot" to the first, would seem, on the contrary, to connote a substantial bearing of historical reconstruction upon theology. But what if one's answer to the first question were, "A bit, but not much"? How would this "middling" response to the first, bear upon the second?

There is an additional question, secondary in nature but still of some significance. If with respect to question (2) one allows a historical reconstruction of Jesus to have some bearing upon theology, should such a historical reconstruction be one derived solely from canonical sources (the gospels and what supplementary or confirmatory evidence can be gleaned from the Acts of the Apostles and the epistolary literature)? Or can such a reconstruction draw from all the sources we can muster, canonical and non-canonical (apocryphal gospels such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter; historians Jewish [Josephus] and Roman; Talmudic literature)?

There is of course no intrinsic reason why a historian of religion or of the ancient world in general should not employ the gospels, along with other documents such as the works of Josephus or Philo Judaeus, as evidence for reconstructing the history of part of the Greco-Roman world in the first century of our era. More specifically, there is no reason why such a historian should not seek to reconstruct what can be known on such a basis of the person Jesus of Nazareth. That is essentially what scholars such as John P. Meier,³⁴ John Dominic Crossan³⁵ and others have attempted to do – though their work (and that of their predecessors in the "Quest" over a hundred years) shows that it is far easier to construct what immediately succeeding generations *believed* about Jesus than to attain to his personal historical reality. The question concerns what bearing, if any, such a broadly-based reconstruction of Jesus should have upon *theology*, specifically upon christology.

Even if the non-canonical material is excluded, the question remains whether, granted the nature of the gospels and the truth they attempt to convey, it is appropriate to seek to go "behind" the narrative and grasp the Jesus of history and, having grasped him, to play this "Jesus" off against the interpretation(s) of his reality preserved in the gospels. What I propose to do from now on is to critique the tendency

34. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1991, 1994).

35. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

represented by Frei and Johnson, assessing the extent to which it is or is not valid, in the hope of arriving at some resolution in particular of the issue stated above: the bearing of reconstructions of the Jesus of history upon christology. Granted that it is difficult to “see” Jesus, are the thick lenses of the gospels distortions which we must correct or essential aids upon which we must primarily rely in order to attain him? In this critique I shall make extensive appeal to the work of David Kelsey and Francis Watson.

3. THE HISTORICAL REFERENCE OF THE GOSPELS AND THEOLOGY

David Kelsey in *The Uses of Scripture in Theology*³⁶ distinguishes three types of activity that may legitimately be called “exegesis”.³⁷ The first – “exegesis 1” – approaches a biblical text as a historical source that itself has historical sources. The goal is to give an account of how the text arrived at its present shape. The second – “exegesis 2” – takes the text as it stands (that is, as a complete whole) and seeks to know what interests shaped its composition and how its original audience would have understood it. The goal here is to determine “what it meant”. Both these approaches take the text simply as text. By contrast, the third approach – “exegesis 3” – takes the text as Christian scripture. In this respect it is guided by theological judgements about the nature of the church’s task and about just how scripture ought be used in the church’s common life to help keep her faithful to that task, judgements that have themselves been shaped by a prior theological judgement about the mode in which God is present in and operative through certain uses of scripture.

For Kelsey, strictly speaking only the results of exegesis 3 can be normative for theology. However, exegesis 1 and exegesis 2 can exercise an influence upon exegesis 3 in several respects. They set limits upon what may be asserted concerning a passage in historical and literary terms.³⁸ They spur the church to transcend entrenched opinions prevalent in the Christian community at any particular time. They force close attention to the “determinateness, the details of the texts”.³⁹

Kelsey, then, allows that historical inquiry into biblical texts (what he designates as the first two modes of exegesis) can have some influence upon theology. But he insists that between the first two types and the third there is a gap, a “ditch”, so to speak.⁴⁰ To pass from history to theology requires a theological “leap” across this ditch. It requires, that

36. David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

37. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Theology*, 198-99.

38. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Theology*, 200.

39. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Theology*, 199.

40. “Ditch” is not Kelsey’s term but mine – an allusion to the famous “ditch” of Lessing: the accidental truths of history can never become the proof of the necessary truths of reason.

is, a prior theological judgement to regard the texts not simply as texts but as canonical scripture reflective of Christian identity. And, as Kelsey finally insists,⁴¹ this theological judgement has a particular priority in that it also determines which patterns shall be construed as authoritative. Thus theology, while influenced by exegesis, retains an essential priority over it.

This is clarifying but, in its giving priority to theology over history (as determined in exegesis 1 and 2), it leaves open the question, "What if (contrary to Frei, Lindbeck and Johnson – and perhaps also to Kelsey) the gospels themselves imply history?" At this point it is helpful to turn to a critique of Frei and Lindbeck offered by Francis Watson.

The relationship between biblical interpretation and theology is the subject of a many-sided study produced by Watson in 1994 under the title *Text, Church and World*.⁴² Taking full account of the contemporary postmodern context, Watson argues that as biblical texts have the Christian community (church) as their primary location, so the church in turn has its primary location in the world, a world which will rightly require the church to address it in terms of contemporary discourse.⁴³ Pursuing this thesis, Watson subjects both Frei and Lindbeck to extended and penetrating critique in the area of the relationship between biblical narrative and history.⁴⁴ While acknowledging Frei's right to insist upon the irreducibility of narrative in literary terms, Watson points out that this leaves open the issue of relating this irreducible narrative to truth in first instance and then to theology. Frei in Watson's view does not satisfactorily address the issue that biblical narratives do point to a world beyond the text and that the reality of that world or certain events in it can reasonably be said to affect the truth of the narrative. Through anxiety to prevent the world contaminating the text, Frei's self-contained text is in danger of becoming a world of illusion, a wilful refusal of reality.⁴⁵ Watson concludes: "if, and only if, this story is true, then all worldly reality must be understood in the light of it. The claim that the text is fundamentally true liberates it from self-containment and enables it to shed its light on worldly realities...."⁴⁶

Likewise, Watson critiques Lindbeck's postmodern and postliberal construal of the reality of Christian faith wholly within Christian language, so that language rather than truth becomes primary and truth remains essentially intrasystemic rather than related to something beyond the text. In this construal the text absorbs the world rather than

41. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Theology*, 200-01.

42. Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

43. See Watson, *Text, Church and World*, "Introduction" (1-14; esp. 11).

44. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 20-29 (Frei); 133-36 (Lindbeck).

45. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 25-26.

46. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 29.

the world the text. And the world absorbed by the text is not the world that, in Christian belief, is already God's creation but an enclosed world devoid of possibilities for interaction with the wider human community. "But what if", asks Watson pertinently, "the story itself directs us to look outward?"⁴⁷

Here Watson puts his finger on the key consideration. True, his main concern is to defend the claim of the text upon present extra-textual reality: to assert its claim to make theological, ethical and political assertions that have to do with universal, extrasystematic truth or falsehood, in the face of certain postmodern tendencies limiting it simply to particularity and self-referentiality.⁴⁸ However, Watson's critique of the tendency to see narrative enclosed totally within itself has, to my mind, equal force against a view that sees the truth of biblical narrative as wholly independent of the historical realities which it purports to describe. Narrative is not *simply* "history-like"; there must be some sense in which it is also "likely history".

Though written prior to the publication of *The Real Jesus*, Watson's critique in this sense avails equally against Johnson's disparagement of history as it does against Frei and Lindbeck.⁴⁹ While all three issue a significant challenge to theologians in respect to the literary and canonical status of the gospels, their move away from history seems unwarranted and extreme. With respect to first question that I formulated above – To what extent does the truth mediated by the gospels depend upon the veracity of the history they appear to describe? – I am moving, as the reader will detect, towards the "middling" response, "A bit, but not much". "A bit" may seem restrictive, but it does indicate something essential. The task now is to tease out how viewing the relationship between the gospel narrative and history in such terms should affect the practice of theology (christology) with respect to history and the gospels (see the second question arising above). I propose to pursue this by formulating a series of principles (stated in italics in each case) with surrounding explanations.

4. THE HISTORICAL JESUS, THE GOSPELS AND CHRISTOLOGY: SOME PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

1. *Interpretation must recognise and respect the essentially narrative genre of the gospels.* The truth and meaning they convey resists

47. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 135.

48. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 137.

49. R. J. Miller in a second critique (see n. 25 above), "The Jesus of Orthodoxy and the Jesuses of the Gospels: A Critique of Luke Timothy Johnson's *The Real Jesus*", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 68 (1997) 101-20, makes the telling point that when Johnson insists that a pattern of Jesus' life embedded in the earliest Christian experience and memory was faithfully mirrored in the gospels, the recourse to "memory" and the phrase "faithfully mirrored" represents at least an implicit attempt to claim that the pattern is accurate historically; see esp. 103-104.

abstraction to summary propositions, on the one hand, or simple reference to historical events appearing to lie behind them on the other. Their primary appeal is to the imagination of a reader or audience already informed and schooled by Christian faith. (In this sense Matthew, Mark and John each in their own way imply the kind of reader Luke explicitly addresses in his Prologue as "Theophilus" [1:3], one already "instructed" to some extent and now open to an imaginative setting of the basic message within a broader vision of the promise and fulfilment of salvation.)

2. *Theology cannot be unconcerned with the human history of Jesus of Nazareth since the narrative truth contained in the four gospels, upon which in the area of christology it principally relies, has essential reference to the historical reality of Jesus. Without reference to the human history of Jesus theology becomes simply a myth, a kite that has escaped its tether to blow away unfettered in the wind. At certain points the gospels in fact appear to make a tie to historical reality explicit: the Prologue to Luke's gospel (Luke 1:1-4); John 20:20-31; 21:24-25 (see also 19:35 [the testimony concerning the flow of blood and water from Jesus' pierced side]) – though each instance has to be understood within the historical conventions of the time.*

3. *But, while "history-like", the gospels are "likely-history" in a very restricted sense that varies greatly from text to text. Judgements as to the degree to which any particular text reflects a basis in history require careful literary analysis and attention to considerations of the form and genre operative. The infancy narrative of Luke's gospel (Luke 1-2), for example, makes certain references to external history (for example, 2:-12⁵⁰) and in this and other respects appear "history-like". Yet the multiple echoes, in language and form, to the Septuagint version of biblical birth stories signals to the alert reader that any reliable information concerning the early years of Jesus has been totally absorbed by the biblical framework in which it has been cast. In this sense the narratives signal fulfilment of biblical promise rather than close correlation with whatever may have been the actual history of Jesus, such as a modern biography would seek to convey.*

4. *The little that we do know concerning Jesus with something approaching certitude is necessary and sufficient to establish the basic credibility of the gospels as narratives having at least some reference to history as part of their essential meaning. There is in fact very little concerning the historical Jesus that we can know with anything approaching historical certitude (something distinct from what we can know with some degree*

50. The reference to the census of Quirinius is, of course, problematic from a historical point of view. For an exhaustive discussion of the question see J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981) 393, 400-405.

of probability⁵¹). But, while the truth claims of the gospels do not require extensive correlation between what they literally describe and historical reality, they do require a certain minimum to be credible. They certainly require that Jesus existed and that his character and the moral quality of his life were of such a nature as to render credible the exalted claims made for him by the gospels. Historical investigation – whether based solely upon the gospels or upon extra-canonical literature besides – cannot establish very much. But, by the same token, this very restricted historical basis cannot disprove very much. If Jesus could be shown to have been a morally corrupt person or one who renounced all faith in God prior to dying, or if, on the other hand, it were convincingly shown that he did not die upon a cross under Pontius Pilate but that long after the claims that he had died and been raised were made he was living an ordinary human existence continuous with his early life,⁵² such matters would present problems for credibility. However, no such historical evidence of this kind has been established; nor is it likely to be.

5. *Christian faith impels believers to give themselves to the truth claims of the gospels on a much broader basis than the scant residue of history that can reliably be detected behind and through them.* It does so on the basis of a prior theological judgement recognising these four accounts of Jesus as canonical, that is, as normatively reflective of the truth whereby the church knows its own identity. This prior theological judgement constitutes the “leap” over the “ditch” between history and faith. Whereas on the basis of what can be known of the Jesus of history, it would not be at all certain that he was Messiah or Son of God in an exalted sense, believers “know” this through giving themselves to the truth of the gospels as reliable witnesses to Jesus. In this they do not primarily attain the Jesus who walked in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem in the third decade of the first century CE. The Jesus they attain is indeed continuous with this Jesus but primarily they attain him as risen Lord, alive and active in the church and the world in a mode transcending history.⁵³ It is the power and presence of this risen Jesus that the gospels portray, even if the genre in which they do so is that of the story of his human life.

51. Thus, while it is virtually certain that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, it is highly probable (but not virtually certain) that he addressed God as “Abba” (Mark 14:36; see Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 121-26, offers a helpful survey of what can be claimed about Jesus within various levels of probability.

52. As in fact claimed by Barbara Thiering (*Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Unlocking the Secrets of His Life Story* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992]; see 116-28, 160) – though so far without acceptance in the scholarly world.

53. Johnson is misguided, in my opinion, to restrict the “Real Jesus” to the risen Lord, suppressing the essential continuity between the risen Jesus and the Jesus who walked in Galilee and Judea.

6. *Inquiry conducted on a purely historical basis (as, for example, in the project of J. P. Meier) into the human history of Jesus of Nazareth, employing both canonical and non-canonical material, is of interest to faith and theology (pace L. T. Johnson), though it can never be normative for theology (because of the "ditch").* Such inquiry, in the first place, serves the credibility of Christian faith in that it establishes that certain historical minimum concerning Jesus without which neither the gospels as "history-like" narratives nor the Christian faith drawing inspiration from them could be credible (see Principle 3 above). Secondly, such research serves, as historical-critical research has always done, to spur and challenge theology to look at the gospels in new ways, shaking it from comfortable views too long left untested and unexamined (see D. Kelsey).

7. *(Conclusion): For the theological and literary reasons outlined the canonical gospels, along with the other New Testament documents, are the normative starting point for christology.* Within the perspective of faith the gospels constitute the four guaranteed "lenses" through which Jesus is attained and truly rendered to the church. Historical constructions of Jesus "behind" and "beyond" the gospels may helpfully suggest ways of interrogating and reading them anew. But such constructions can never have priority in theology over the gospels, either in whole or with respect to any particular detail.

5. FURTHER ISSUES ARISING OUT OF A CANONICAL APPROACH

Insistence that theology and Christian interpretation in general must remain – at least for normativity – with the canonical gospels raises four further issues. These I shall briefly address in conclusion – while well aware that each raises multiple issues of its own deserving of far more extended treatment.

1. First of all, insistence upon the normativity of the canonical gospels may seem far too restrictive. It certainly will be if theology were to see itself confined to reading out of the gospel texts a single literal meaning, as much erstwhile practice of the historical-critical approach appeared to suggest. However, Christian interpretation of the gospels has rediscovered – or reaccepted – the principle that a passage can have multiple meanings.⁵⁴ A passage can have many valid meanings – though appropriate exegetical analysis may indicate that some meanings have a higher claim to impose themselves authoritatively than

54. See, for example, the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; Boston: St Paul Books and Media, 1993), which in a section dealing with the literal sense says of historical-critical exegesis: "... (it) should seek rather to determine the direction of thought expressed by the text; this direction, far from working towards a limitation of meaning, will on the contrary dispose the exegete to perceive extensions that are more or less foreseeable in advance" (p. 83). The following paragraph speaks of new meanings arising out of fresh circumstances in which the text is placed.

others. Other meanings again, whether for exegetical reasons or in the light of the wider truth of the gospel, may be judged to have no validity at all. An instance of this would be employing the cry of the mob in Matt 27:25 to legitimate persecution of Jewish persons in this or any other era. Even allegory – so despised in the historical-critical heyday – seems poised to make a re-entry upon the reputable interpretive stage.⁵⁵ In this sense according normative status to the canonical gospels can be a recipe for enrichment rather than restriction.

2. Secondly, restriction to the canonical gospels might appear to disqualify or at least put in question liberative insights gained on behalf of the socially oppressed and disadvantaged through the priority accorded to certain constructions of Jesus' life in liberation theology. It is a highly delicate matter for a first-world scholar to question such christologies. They arise out of communities that are justly termed "martyred"⁵⁶ and in any case present themselves as contextual, not necessarily claiming universal validity.⁵⁷ That said, I would argue that working from within the canonical gospels may well attain all that such christologies seek from the historical construction of Jesus and attain it on a sounder and more theologically convincing basis. The conclusion would be more theologically convincing in the sense of being on the other side – the "theology" side – of the "ditch" between history and faith alluded to above. It could also be more convincing in the sense of being less open to Schweitzer's charge that all such constructions inevitably reflect the ideological bent of those who undertake them.⁵⁸

But how would such a reading of the gospels attain to what such christologies seek in favour of the poor? Not, to my mind, by forcing the gospels to say things or adopt stances clearly anachronistic in their original setting but by drawing out the implications of what the gospels do explicitly assert. Thus, for example, it is difficult to believe that the primary focus of Luke's gospel does not lie upon human relations with God. The "release" (*aphesis*) that Jesus freely offers (Luke 1:77; 3:3; 4:18; 24:7; see Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18) is release from captivity to sin and alienation from God. At the same time, the gospel makes perfectly clear from the start that the conversion it requires will be problematic for the wealthy and those at the centre of power, while completely unproblematic (and in some cases unnecessary) for the marginalised and the poor (esp. 7:29-34). The vision of life Jesus offers

55. See R. L. Wilken, "In Defense of Allegory", *Modern Theology* 14 (1998) 197-212.

56. See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 254-71.

57. In *Jesus the Liberator* Jon Sobrino consistently writes descriptively in the name of "Latin American Theology".

58. I say this fully cognizant that there can be "presupposition-less" reading of the gospels no more than there can be "presupposition-less" constructions of the historical Jesus. I am also fully aware that liberation theologies are perfectly open about the standpoint from which they begin: a clear option for the poor of the societies from which and for which they write.

and enacts, were it to spread and consolidate in human affairs, would be revolutionary with respect to social structure and patterns of interaction. The attitude to wealth which Luke commends in connection with a proper relationship to God totally undermines an economic system based upon acquisitiveness, inequality and greed. "Salvation" means many things in Luke-Acts. It cannot be restricted to the fate of the individual after death nor does Luke know of a "spiritual" salvation divorced from the social and physical. Salvation has to do with the reconstitution of humanity as the eschatological people of God in fulfilment of the ancient promises cherished and held in trust for humanity by Israel. Luke's gospel is the most obvious one to seize upon in this regard. But there are no good grounds for believing that the other three gospels (Matthew, Mark and, yes, even John) are any less open to contextual readings of this kind.⁵⁹

3. Restriction to the canonical may place much greater burdens upon feminist interpretation. In a recent study Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has criticised both the positivist historical approach she sees to be characteristic of the "Third Quest", especially as represented by John Dominic Crossan, and what she dubs the "neo-orthodox" canonical approach represented by Luke Timothy Johnson.⁶⁰ The former continues to operate out of a liberal androcentric framework, neglectful of feminist insights, while its continuing insistence upon the uniqueness and exceptional nature of Jesus inevitably sets him over against his native Judaism.⁶¹ The latter is criticised, not only for its "obvious" derivation from modern neo-orthodox stress on radical obedience, but also for its failure to perceive that the abandonment of history in favour of canon itself involves "an historical re-constructive formulation that is not simply identical with the canon", the extraction of an underlying pattern from the four distinct gospels that abolishes difference.⁶² Fiorenza seeks to overcome the inevitable dualities that limit both approaches with a feminist liberationist approach, attentive to the politics of interpretation, in which memory functions as chief paradigm for the reconstruction of the historical Jesus. The change of theoretical framework to that of memory in the discipleship of equals will disclose how the agency and leadership of the marginalised, especially women, shaped Jesus and early Christian beginnings.

Despite the sophistication and critical reflectiveness of Fiorenza's hermeneutic, it is difficult to escape the impression that bound up with

59. For example, Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

60. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation", *Harvard Theological Review* 90 (1997) 343-58.

61. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation", 347-48.

62. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation", 350-51.

the “memory” paradigm is a historical reconstruction normative to a degree that poses difficulty for theology. Moreover, the “submersion” of Jesus within the community of equals sits in such tension with his unequivocal personal eminence in the gospels as to make it virtually impossible to move forward theologically. Clearly the androcentric tendency in the gospels needs to be critiqued. But in theological terms it would seem preferable to read the gospels in a way that critiques them from within. By “within” I mean a critique arising out of the *sensus fidei* present within the Christian community at any particular moment through the interplay between its reading of the gospel, its awareness of tradition under the impulse and guidance of the Spirit (a distinctly Catholic perspective perhaps) and its current social, cultural and historical location.⁶³ Such a reading may “go against the grain” of the literal thrust of the narrative, but that is nothing new in Christian interpretation.⁶⁴ It will also be part of a larger perspective that relativises the gospels, and indeed all canonical literature, seeing Scripture as simply one element, albeit an immensely significant one, in the total construct of ongoing Christian identity and practice.

4. Of even greater concern is the anti-Jewish slant that the gospels appear to betray in greater or lesser degree. There is no need to argue this point. It simply reflects the fact that all four gospels, that of Mark not excluded, stem from Christian communities that were in the process of establishing and defining their distinctive identity. What they wanted to assert positively concerning Jesus and themselves they inevitably stated in the context of a highly dialectical relationship with the background (Judaism) from which they had emerged. To address this issue contemporary New Testament interpretation stands sorely in need of a developed technique of “anti-anti-Jewish” interpretation, capable of reading “against the grain” of the anti-Judaism lying upon the surface of the gospels and akin in self-assurance and sophistication to the various modes of criticism developed by feminist interpretation in the last three decades. What this approach might positively call itself is hard to know. It is, however, an imperative rather than an optional requirement of responsible Christian interpretation and use of the gospels.

63. Johnson has some brief concluding reflections along these lines in *The Real Jesus*, 175-77. In *Text, Church and World* (“Part Three: Holy Scripture and Feminist Critique”) 155-219, Watson, in an attempt to overcome the “impossibly patriarchal” bias of both Old Testament narratives and the Gospels, and to retrieve both as “Scripture”, actually undertakes such an intracanonial critique, interpreting some texts in the light of others and also making appeal to the Pauline “law/gospel” distinction. With respect to Paul it is more accurate (and useful) to distinguish in terms of “flesh” and “spirit”. “Law/gospel” strikes me as more a Lutheran than a Pauline distinction.

64. One has only to think of the way in which the Catholic tradition has, almost from the beginning, blithely ignored evangelical injunctions such as “Call no man ‘Father’” (Matt 23:9) and the ban on the taking of oaths (Matt 5:33-37).

CONCLUSION

So, ultimately, I am arguing for a theological privileging of the canonical gospels in christology, in a way that does not divorce them from reference to the Jesus of history but acknowledges the limitations of that reference as regards both actual knowledge and significance for theology. Within the perspective of Christian faith, these four accounts give access to Jesus as living Lord in a way that is truthful to the reality of his historical life while uncovering its transcendent depth and meaning. Just as art can depict Jesus Christ in many ways (from gruesomely realistic Latin American crucifixes to solemn Byzantine panto-crators), none “realistic” in the sense of a photographic likeness yet each expressive of something true about him, so no one of the four gospel “portraits” exhausts the total truth about Jesus. The immense richness of the four-fold witness is lost when the portraits are homogenised into one single construct—as the Church recognised early on when it refused to abandon the gospels for the harmony of Tatian. Each gospel remains a privileged vehicle of access to the total truth concerning who Jesus was, who he is and who he will be.

The fact that early Christian communities – presumably following the lead of Mark – chose to formulate the Gospel in the guise of “history-like”, quasi-biographical accounts coheres with a sense that the claim of God pronounced by Jesus addresses human beings in the context of everyday life and affairs. The “biographical cast” of the message does not isolate his historical life from the exalted claims made subsequently about him and attribute to it separate meaning.⁶⁵ The four gospels render the reality of Jesus in an open-ended, inexhaustible richness. What I have tried to suggest here is that, quite apart from the precariousness of historical reconstruction, the narrative genre of the gospels and their canonical status suggest that christology, as a theological enterprise distinct from purely historical inquiry, would do best to follow that lead.

65. In fact, one could argue that none of the gospels or any New Testament document for that matter really knows or promotes a “christology from below” in the strict sense divorced from the deeper reality unveiled in the resurrection. Jesus is “Son of God” in Mark’s gospel from the very start (1:1 [*pace* the variant reading omitting the title]) and thereafter he is constantly portrayed in theophanies (1:12-13; 4:35-41; 6:45-52; 9:2-8). Matthew and Luke, each in their own way, employ the motif of the virginal conception to signal early on that Jesus has a unique and exalted status completely outstripping conventional Jewish messianic expectation. The prologues of the Fourth Gospel (1:1-18) and Hebrews (1:1-4) do the same. Concerning Paul, see B. Byrne, “Christ’s Pre-Existence in Pauline Soteriology”, *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 308-30. See Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus*, 82-83.