

## Narrative or History? – A False Dilemma The Theological Significance of the Historical Jesus\*

---

James McEvoy

**Abstract:** The twentieth century saw a paradigm shift in christology from a christology determined by the terminology of the Chalcedonian doctrine to one with a focus on Jesus in the context of his time. A common understanding of the theological significance of the historical Jesus, however, is yet to be achieved. In the last decade three scholars – William Loewe, Brendan Byrne and Luke Timothy Johnson – have argued that the historical Jesus has limited theological significance. This article examines the way in which these authors understand the relationship between narrative and history and argues for an interpretive view of that relationship. The views of Loewe, Byrne and Johnson are critiqued from this perspective.

IN THE EARLY 1980S I joined a group of keen individuals to study Edward Schillebeeckx's newly published *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. It was my first serious encounter with historical Jesus studies and it proved to be significant for both my spiritual life and my life as a pastor and preacher. Jesus leapt off the page for me in a way that he hadn't before. Through Schillebeeckx's account of Jesus' meals, for example, I had to consider meals as more than just a daily necessity; they had greater significance than might appear from the occasional references afforded them in the gospels. According to Schillebeeckx, Jesus' meals communicated both his character – "Jesus' dealings with people liberate them and make them glad"<sup>1</sup> – and his message: "Meal-sharing in fellowship...is a fundamental trait of the historical Jesus. In that way Jesus shows himself to be God's eschatological messenger, conveying the news of God's invitation to all...to attend the peaceful

---

\*I would like to thank Denis Edwards and Beth Prior for fruitful conversations about this issue and also the following who responded to an earlier draft: Stephen Downs, Andrew Dutney, Lorna Hallahan, Bernadette Kiley, Kathy McEvoy, Philip Marshall and Michael Trainor. My thanks also to *Pacifica's* reviewers, particularly to Brendan Byrne, for his gracious response to my argument

1. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979) 200.

occasion of God's rule."<sup>2</sup> When studied against the background of Jesus' life and time, what had previously seemed passing references in the gospels added an extraordinary richness to the understanding of Jesus. Schillebeeckx's historical study situated Jesus against a background which was assumed by the gospel writers but which, through distance from Jesus' world, was not mine and not immediately available to me. And more than simply increasing my knowledge of the pattern of life in first-century Palestine, or adding detail to an already-formed image of Jesus, Schillebeeckx's study of Jesus' meals took me to the heart of the matter – a renewed and deeper understanding of the meaning of Jesus' life. In turn, my new understanding of Jesus' meals brought about a much richer reading of the gospels.

Schillebeeckx's *Jesus* is one contribution to a movement that John Galvin regards as a paradigm shift in Roman Catholic theology.<sup>3</sup> Also contributing to this shift in the 1970s were, amongst others, Karl Rahner, Walter Kasper and Hans Küng.<sup>4</sup> Their attention to the Jesus of history strongly contrasts with the christology of the first two thirds of the century, which was narrowly focussed on the content and implications of the doctrine of the early ecumenical councils, with an almost exclusive stress on the divinity of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Some prominent theologians of this earlier period, such as Karl Adam and Romano Guardini, urged a greater emphasis on the humanity of Christ, but, according to Galvin, this emphasis was taken up in earnest only during the 1950s and 60s with the debate about the knowledge and self-consciousness of Christ.<sup>6</sup> Yet even in that extensive debate, the terminology employed was speculative rather than historical – using philosophical concepts to articulate the limited nature of Jesus' human knowledge. Galvin summarises: "Even the more innovative Catholic dogmatic theology of this period not only affirmed the dogma of Chalcedon but also took the terminology of that council – one person, two natures – as the reference point for its own further reflections on Christological topics."<sup>7</sup>

With the works of Schillebeeckx, Rahner, Kasper and others in the 1970s, the emphasis moved from philosophical discussion about Christ's

2. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 218.

3. John Galvin, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Jesus of History: A Paradigm Shift in Catholic Christology", *Theological Studies* 55 (1994) 252-73.

4. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978); Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1976); Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1977).

5. While theologians of this period were no doubt orthodox in their affirmation of the Chalcedonian creed (Christ being fully human and fully divine), Galvin points out that the full reality of Jesus' humanity was neglected.

6. See, for example: Karl Rahner, "Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-consciousness of Christ", *Theological Investigations Volume 5: Later Writings* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966) 193-215; and Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968).

7. Galvin, "From the Humanity of Christ", 253-4.

human nature to a focus on Jesus in the context of his time – the historical Jesus. In this new paradigm, the Chalcedonian doctrine of one person and two natures is still affirmed, yet the fifth-century terminology no longer governs the debate.

Since the 1970s, research into the historical Jesus has proceeded at such a pace that keeping up with new publications in the field would be more than a full-time occupation.<sup>8</sup> The ceaseless activity of biblical scholars and the incorporation of their work by systematic theologians raises the important question: What significance does the turn to the historical Jesus have for christology? My argument in this essay is that the turn to the historical Jesus is of crucial significance for christology. Put rather baldly: the person and work of Jesus is at the very heart of Christian faith. Christians claim that in this particular person God is definitively revealed. If Jesus' life reveals God, faith in the God of Jesus Christ must be intimately connected with the facts of his life – at least his message and manner of life (to use Schillebeeckx's phrase). Through attending to the pattern of Jesus' life we come to understand what God is like. My earlier example of Schillebeeckx's portrayal of Jesus' meals is useful here. Not only does Schillebeeckx's account of Jesus' meals bring us a clearer vision of Jesus' character and message, it also brings us closer to the God of Jesus Christ as a generous host, open to sinners. In the final section of this essay I want to argue that attending to the pattern of Jesus' life requires an historical study.

The significance of historical Jesus research for christology is reinforced by developments in modern biblical exegesis. The christology of the early part of the twentieth century relied on statements such as those in John's Gospel "I and the Father are one" (10:30) and "no one comes to the Father, but by me" (14:6) to establish the foundations of Christological doctrine. These key Johannine statements were understood by theologians of that earlier period as expressions of Jesus' own understanding of his preaching, healings and miracles, and also as expressions of his understanding of his salvific character. A person's self-understanding is central to any adequate portrayal of the person. In the words of the contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor, humans are self-defining animals.<sup>9</sup> The way in which we understand ourselves shapes both our own humanity and the world around us. But modern

8. A few of the major works on the historical Jesus in the last twenty years are: Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979); Marcus Borg, *Jesus a New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume Two: Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).

9. Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 15-57.

biblical scholars warn against ascribing to the historical Jesus statements such as those quoted above, arguing that Jesus preached the kingdom and not himself, and that these statements reflect more the theology of the Johannine author than the actual preaching of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> If we take this finding of biblical scholarship seriously, we need to seek the foundation of Christological doctrine in the “implicit christology” of Jesus’ life. In general terms this means exploring the link between the person of Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom of God in word and deed.<sup>11</sup> And that is precisely the task for christology envisaged by Schillebeeckx and others.

#### CAUTIONARY ADVICE

Change on the scale of a paradigm shift inevitably produces difficulties – sometimes chaos. So, even though research into the historical Jesus has given rise to a rich and extensive body of theological reflection, it is hardly surprising that some theologians and biblical scholars warn about the dangers of simply replacing an emphasis on the humanity of Christ with an emphasis on the historical Jesus. They argue that there are problems inherent in the quest for the historical Jesus, particularly in the way its findings are incorporated into christology. This is the issue of the theological significance of the historical Jesus. David Tracy and Elizabeth Johnson addressed it nearly two decades ago,<sup>12</sup> and in the last couple of years it has been taken up with renewed vigour by three scholars: William Loewe, Brendan Byrne and Luke Timothy Johnson. It is to their cautionary voices that I now turn.

#### WILLIAM LOEWE

In a recent article in *Theological Studies*<sup>13</sup> Loewe concurs with Galvin’s judgement that there has been a paradigm shift in Catholic christology and argues that the theological significance of the historical Jesus is now a particularly acute issue for two reasons. First, since its inception in 1985, the Jesus Seminar has successfully attracted broad public interest through a strong media campaign. Founded by Robert Funk and a group of North American scholars, the seminar drew particular attention to itself by its use of variously coloured marbles to vote on the

10. Galvin, “From the Humanity of Christ”, 262-66.

11. Galvin, “From the Humanity of Christ”, 263.

12. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981) from p. 238 *passim*; Elizabeth Johnson, “The Theological Relevance of the Historical Jesus: A Debate and a Thesis”, *Thomist* 48 (1984) 1-43.

13. William P. Loewe, “From the Humanity of Christ to the Historical Jesus”, *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 314-31.

authenticity of the sayings of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Loewe fears that the Jesus Seminar may follow the success of its media campaign with success in its stated aim of separating Jesus from scriptural and credal understandings of him, with the end result of making historical reconstructions the measure of popular understandings of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, whereas it was possible in the early 1980s to speak accurately about the consensus of biblical exegetes on Jesus' message and person, that consensus has collapsed.<sup>16</sup> The wide range of historical images of Jesus on offer from scholars now includes "the wonder-working charismatic *hasid*, the eschatological prophet, the Jewish sage, the hippie-like wandering peasant Cynic, one who combines and exceeds the roles of Elijah-like prophet, teacher of Torah, and wonder-worker, etc."<sup>17</sup> So, under attack from the Jesus Seminar, and with a smorgasbord of competing images of the historical Jesus, Loewe argues that theologians must consider what significance the historical Jesus has for christology.

To frame the question about theological significance, Loewe refers back to the debate between David Tracy and Elizabeth Johnson in the early 1980s. Tracy argues in *The Analogical Imagination* that the historical Jesus has limited theological significance for christology. The event and person of Jesus is normative for the Christian tradition, he says, but that event occurs in the present "through the mediation of the community founded on the original apostolic witness to that event".<sup>18</sup> The norm and foundation of christology, then, is "the Jesus remembered by the tradition and community as representative of God's own presence among us".<sup>19</sup> For Tracy, claims that the historical Jesus is the norm for the tradition are confused. In his words: "The 'historical Jesus' is at best a relatively external and secondary criterion of appropriateness for certain necessary assumptions or presuppositions of that witness to Jesus."<sup>20</sup> He is simply prepared to grant that, in this secondary function, historical Jesus research is useful "as a contemporary theological way to keep alive and reformulate the 'dangerous' or 'subversive' memory of Jesus for the present community in fidelity to the original Jesus-kerygma and Christ-kerygma of the scriptural communities".<sup>21</sup>

---

14. An account of the work of the Jesus Seminar can be found in its journal, *Foundations and Facets Forum*. For critiques of the seminar see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 29-35; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 1-80.

15. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 317-18.

16. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 324-26.

17. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 330-31.

18. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 320.

19. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 239.

20. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 238.

21. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 239.

In a 1984 article published in *The Thomist*, Johnson responded to Tracy's stance on the theological significance of the historical Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Against Tracy's point about the historical Jesus being the wrong norm for christology, Johnson argues that the New Testament concerns itself with the history of Jesus as one of the criteria of its own validity, and therefore theology should faithfully do likewise.<sup>23</sup> Johnson argues that because the Church confesses Jesus as the Christ, the historical Jesus is theologically significant. She summarises her position in a thesis:

The reconstructed image of the historical Jesus not only functions today as the equivalent of the memory impression of Jesus in the early Church, but actually is the equivalent of it, i.e. is the means by which significant segments of the present generation of believers remember Jesus who is confessed as the Christ. As such, it is an element of the living tradition of the present Church.<sup>24</sup>

Johnson summarises the functions of historical Jesus research. First, historical knowledge has already entered into believers' faith-image of Jesus. Secondly, historical knowledge has a critical function when it purifies the Church's faith-image of Jesus from ideological manipulation. And thirdly, the growth in historical understanding of Jesus counters the docetic impulse in the Christian community, where Jesus is treated as a mythological or ideological figure, and the shape of his humanity is regarded as peripheral to his identity.<sup>25</sup>

In the context of the strong influence of the Jesus Seminar and the collapse of the exegetical consensus about Jesus' message and person, Loewe stands with Tracy, arguing that Johnson's claim for the significance of the historical Jesus is problematic.<sup>26</sup> For Loewe it is problematic, in first instance, because the apostolic witness, rather than the historical Jesus, provides the norm for faith. It is further problematic in that history is such a complex activity. In respect to Jesus, history includes (a) locating relevant sources, (b) extricating facts from these sources, and (c) settling on an historically intelligible image of Jesus from the facts so ascertained. Loewe puts it this way:

"The historical Jesus" thus refers to a complex construct that rests on a set of more or less probable judgements about which sources are relevant and to what degree. Following upon those judgements there follows another set, each one again of greater or lesser probability, determining what Jesus actually said and did. Those judgements in turn supply the data for yet another judgement

22. Johnson, "Theological Relevance".

23. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 322; Johnson, "Theological Relevance", 19.

24. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 322; Johnson, "Theological Relevance", 25.

25. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 323; Johnson, "Theological Relevance", 32-34.

26. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 327.

concerning which image or images best render the facts constituted by the second set of judgements historically intelligible.<sup>27</sup>

Because of this complexity, Loewe argues, the historical Jesus is too fragile and tenuous a construction to be the foundation of Christian faith.

In assessing the theological significance of the historical Jesus, Loewe concludes with Tracy that due to the nature of both faith and history, "The historical Jesus' constitutes neither the ground nor basis for Christian faith, nor is it the norm for faith."<sup>28</sup> He adds, however, that the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith are not disparate realities and that when historical Jesus constructs are drawn into the horizon of faith, "these historical images and narratives may provide the material for new christological symbols...disclosive of both Jesus' status as God's self-presence in the present and of the values inherent in the faith response to this Jesus the Christ."<sup>29</sup> There may, therefore, be some use for historical Jesus research, says Loewe, "but 'the historical Jesus' is neither the foundation of christology nor its primary norm".<sup>30</sup>

In the concluding section of this essay I will address the two primary arguments offered by Loewe to support his judgement that the historical Jesus has limited theological significance: first, that the apostolic witness, not the historical Jesus, is normative for Christian faith; and secondly, that the historical Jesus is too fragile and tenuous to be the foundation of Christian faith.

#### BRENDAN BYRNE

Byrne addresses the issue of the theological significance of the historical Jesus in an article in this journal entitled "Gospel Narrative and the Jesus of History: Where Should Christology Begin?"<sup>31</sup> In this article Byrne strives to hold two things in tension: he both values the narrative nature of the gospels and at the same time recognises that the gospel narratives point to something beyond themselves. Addressing the question: "to what extent does the truth mediated by the gospels depend upon the veracity of the history they appear to describe?"<sup>32</sup> he very cautiously responds, "a bit, but not much".<sup>33</sup> In amplifying this response Byrne says that this "bit" of history is essential, and he then offers seven principles for understanding the relationship between history and the gospel narrative.

27. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 328-29.

28. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 329-30.

29. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 330.

30. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 331.

31. "Gospel Narrative and the Jesus of History: Where Should Christology Begin?", *Pacifica* 13 (2000) 49-66;

32. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 56.

33. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 59.

As the starting point of his argument, Byrne draws the reader's attention to a central line of thought in Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.<sup>34</sup> According to Frei, biblical interpretation has been misshapen as a result of the preoccupation of the Enlightenment with history. Whereas previously no strong distinction had been made between the meaning of a biblical text and its historical reference, following the Enlightenment, "meaning and historical reference were distinguished in such a way that the latter became the 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".<sup>35</sup> And in Frei's view this is a major error because it fails to respect the fundamentally narrative nature of the biblical text. Byrne summarises:

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.<sup>36</sup>

In the context of Frei's narrative approach, Byrne proposes two crucial questions about the relationship of history and narrative: "(1) To what extent does the truth mediated by the gospels depend upon the veracity of the history they appear to describe?... [and] (2) To what extent should historical-critical reconstruction of the 'facts' concerning Jesus bear upon theology?"<sup>37</sup> In answer to these questions Byrne refers to works by David Kelsey and Francis Watson and argues that the biblical narrative cannot be understood as entirely self-referential.<sup>38</sup> The biblical narrative points to a world beyond the text and "the reality of that world or certain events in it can reasonably be said to affect the truth of the narrative".<sup>39</sup>

Byrne holds, therefore, to the narrative nature of the gospels while recognising that they cannot be separated from history. But how does he conceive of that relationship? To the first question quoted in the paragraph above, Byrne replies "a bit, but not much".<sup>40</sup> Given his

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

35. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 53.

36. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 53. Byrne refers to Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 11-16.

37. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 56.

38. David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

39. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 58.

40. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 59.

criticism of Frei for neglecting the historical reference of the biblical text, Byrne's "a bit but not much" is surprising – it seems to minimise the place of history. But if the reality of Jesus' world can affect the truth of the narrative (and Byrne argues that it can), understanding the reality of his world accurately would seem to matter more than he suggests. Jesus' message, his manner of life, and his death are not incidental to the gospel narratives, and understanding them accurately requires historical investigation, since the gospel writers assume a background which is not ours but is crucial for accurate interpretation – as my early example of Jesus' meals attempts to make clear. The reason for Byrne's caution becomes clearer in the next section of the article – seven principles of interpretation that express his understanding of the relationship between the gospels and history.

Byrne's first two principles of interpretation enunciate the values of narrative and history. In his words, "1. Interpretation must recognise and respect the essentially narrative genre of the gospels.... 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."<sup>41</sup> His third and fourth principles deal with the relationship between these two values and help the reader to understand his previous statement, "a bit, but not much". He states these principles, "3. But while 'history-like', the gospels are 'likely-history' in a very restricted sense that varies greatly from text to text.... 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."<sup>42</sup>

In the articulation of his third and fourth principles we begin to see what Byrne means by the term "history". For Byrne, history is very hard to come by in the gospels. In amplifying his fourth principle, he says "Historical investigation – whether based solely upon the gospels or upon extra-canonical literature besides – cannot establish very much."<sup>43</sup> In the following paragraph Byrne writes of "the scant residue of history that can reliably be detected behind and through" the gospels.<sup>44</sup> It seems that by history, here, Byrne means events, facts or locatable instances, which can be identified by historical-critical methods and separated from the author's interpretation of those events. The gospels are certainly full of information about Jesus of Nazareth, but, according to Byrne, nearly all of this is not history, presumably

---

41. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 60.

42. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 60-61.

43. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 61.

44. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 61.

because of the theological interest of the author – the author's interpretation.

It is this view of history as events or provable facts that governs Byrne's reply "a bit, but not much" to the question: "to what extent does the truth mediated by the gospels depend upon the veracity of the history they appear to describe?"<sup>45</sup> Because there is so much in the life of Jesus and the gospel accounts of that life that cannot be pinned down to locatable instances, Byrne argues that there is little history there. In the final section of my study I will further explore Byrne's understanding of history and its effect on the minimalist relationship he envisages between the Jesus of history and the gospel narratives.

#### LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

What first strikes the reader of Luke Timothy Johnson's writing on the historical Jesus is its strident, polemical tone.<sup>46</sup> The title of his 1996 book, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, ensures that the polemic begins as early as possible: on the dust jacket. Even though his chapter published three years later is a little more gentle,<sup>47</sup> he ascribes less than salubrious motives to scholars of the historical Jesus while not even questioning his own. While one can share Johnson's annoyance, particularly with the methods of the Jesus Seminar, the tone of his writing on this issue is often unsavoury. The result is at times that crucial theological issues are sidelined and much needed clarity lost to the argument.

Johnson's argument has twin thrusts: he is arguing both *against* the theological relevance of historical Jesus research and *for* his own preferred method of interpreting scripture. To take first his positive argument. For Johnson, the resurrection is crucial to understanding the person of Jesus. What he calls the *real* Jesus is not the product of historical reconstruction – the *real* Jesus is Jesus risen.<sup>48</sup> In Johnson's words,

Christianity based itself on belief in the resurrection, which means that the response of faith is directed not to a set of facts about a man of the past who had died but to a person who had entered into the

45. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 59.

46. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); Luke Timothy Johnson, "Imagining the World Scripture Imagines", *Modern Theology* 14 (1998) 165-180; Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Humanity of Jesus: What's at Stake in the Quest for the Historical Jesus", in John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, and Werner H. Kelber, *The Jesus Controversy: Perspectives in Conflict* (ed. Gerald P. McKenny; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) 48-74.

47. Johnson, "The Humanity of Jesus".

48. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 133-40.

life of God so fully that he continues to be present as life-giving spirit.<sup>49</sup>

The experience of the resurrection has shaped the Church's memory of Jesus. And in turn, the Church's memory of Jesus has been recorded in the Christian scriptures, both the gospels and the letters. So, for Johnson, correctly understanding the scriptures requires a literary rather than an historical study in order to get to the faith experience of the early community. He puts it this way: "This portrayal of Jesus...is found in the gospels, not in the individual sayings and stories but in their narrative shaping as such. It is an image of Jesus that is accessible not through historical analysis, but through literary and religious apprehension."<sup>50</sup> Johnson's *real* Jesus is "not simply a figure of the past but very much and above all a figure of the present",<sup>51</sup> alive in the faith-experience of the contemporary community of his followers.

Next, consider Johnson's argument against the theological relevance of research into the historical Jesus. To set the direction of his chapter, "The Humanity of Jesus", Johnson asks what motivates research into the historical Jesus. He lands on the answer: "the conviction that Jesus' humanity is in some fashion or other normative for Christian identity".<sup>52</sup> Certainly this conviction is central to Christian faith, and Johnson argues that in his own position (which I have sketched in the paragraph above) it is taken seriously. In contrast to his own stance, however, he says that Christian scholars of the historical Jesus articulate the conviction in this way: "what Jesus said and did before his death, indeed his vision of reality, is normative for Christians because in those words and actions and perceptions God was expressing the norm for human life"<sup>53</sup> Johnson correctly adds that this is a traditional way of expressing the doctrine of the incarnation, but he says that what sets Christian scholars of the historical Jesus on their quest is the judgement that the gospels are "inadequate historical sources for the 'real Jesus'" rather than being seen as "witnesses and interpretations of him in the light of faith".<sup>54</sup> Those who pursue the path of history, then, attempt to "get behind" the gospel accounts to the facts of the matter.

This is the nub of Johnson's critique of historical Jesus studies, and there seem to be four steps. First, that historical Jesus scholars judge the gospels to be inadequate historical sources. Secondly, they discard the narrative framework of the gospels as the pattern of Jesus' life. Thirdly, using historical-critical methods they distill historical facts from insider and outsider sources. And fourthly, they reconstruct a history of Jesus

49. Johnson, "The Humanity of Jesus", 69.

50. Johnson, "The Humanity of Jesus", 72.

51. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 142.

52. Johnson, "The Humanity of Jesus", 66.

53. Johnson, "The Humanity of Jesus", 67.

54. Johnson, "The Humanity of Jesus", 67.

from the ground up using the distilled facts. Johnson argues that once the narrative structure of the gospels is discarded, the pieces can be put together in any number of ways, and the meaning of Jesus' life witnessed to by the early community is lost.<sup>55</sup> Hence, he argues that historical Jesus studies have no theological significance.

There is a degree of overstatement and confusion in several of Johnson's points. For example, the claim that scholars of the historical Jesus regard the gospels as "inadequate historical sources" is crude. It neglects the value of exploring the background of Jesus' life and time, and misrepresents the attitude of scholars to the gospels. It also does not accurately account for the attention the gospels receive from historical Jesus scholars, most of whom mine them as historical sources. However, the crucial issue which governs Johnson's judgement about historical Jesus research is his concept of history – as with the contributions of both Loewe and Byrne. Johnson contrasts history with narrative, and understands history as the provable events or facts distilled from both the gospel narrative and outsider sources – which facts become the basis of historical reconstruction. He says of the work of historical Jesus scholars: "History is put in service of the search for a pure revelation."<sup>56</sup> Johnson argues that this contrast between history and narrative is present in the work of historical Jesus scholars and does not argue against this understanding of history.

It would be misleading to characterise Johnson's view of history as entirely focussed on brute facts – that is, as entirely empiricist.<sup>57</sup> In *The Real Jesus* Johnson argues at length that history is always "an interpretive activity".<sup>58</sup> Two chapters – "The Limitations of History" and "What's Historical About Jesus?" – are given over to developing his understanding of history and applying it to Jesus and Early Christianity. But in these two chapters, Johnson swings frequently between an interpretive and an empiricist view of history, often on the same page. For example, having stated that history is interpretive, in the following paragraph Johnson argues that history "misses a great deal of what is most properly human, things like alienation and forgiveness, compassion and despair, meaning and value, love and hope".<sup>59</sup> These *are* the great themes of human existence and without them an account of Jesus' life would be mindless. Why, then, does Johnson argue that history misses them? Presumably because they cannot be "verified" as facts. A second example: in his chapter, entitled "What's Historical About Jesus", Johnson discusses Jesus' healings from the perspective of the historian. He says that while it is possible to verify that *something*

---

55. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 125-6.

56. Johnson, "The Humanity of Jesus", 67.

57. A critique of the empiricist view of history is developed in the following section.

58. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 82.

59. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 82.

happened, "there is no way to verify historically the essential claim of such stories, namely, that it was God's power mediated through Jesus that effected the healing. Such claims simply lie outside history's competence".<sup>60</sup> But theological interpretations of Jesus' healings can only be ruled to lie outside of history's competence if, in the practice of history, facts are split off from interpretation, particularly theological interpretation.

When it comes to judgement about historical Jesus research, Johnson, in "The Humanity of Jesus", does not pursue or even acknowledge an interpretive view of history. In the following section of this study I will further evaluate Johnson's view of historical Jesus research, arguing that fact and interpretation are always found together in the study of history.

Johnson's literary approach to interpreting the scriptures is not without theological problems of its own. Because he makes such a strong distinction between the historical Jesus and the event of the resurrection, Johnson runs the grave risk of undervaluing the incarnation and regarding the resurrection as an event in which Jesus sheds his humanity to achieve divine status. Statements like the following approach an adoptionist understanding of the resurrection: "after his death he entered into an entirely new form of existence, one in which he shared the power of God and in which he could share that power with others" and "the resurrection means...the passage of the human Jesus into the power of God".<sup>61</sup> John Galvin remarks that in statements such as these "it is hard to avoid the impression that the earthly Jesus was not, in the words of the Council of Chalcedon, 'truly God and truly man'".<sup>62</sup> Faithful adherence to the Christian creed means holding together Jesus' life, death and resurrection rather than opting for one over the others.

I now propose to address the arguments of Johnson, Loewe and Byrne against the theological significance of the historical Jesus in the light of an interpretative view of history.

#### HISTORY, INTERPRETATION AND NARRATIVE

An insight that came to the fore through the Enlightenment was the recognition that history shapes experience. The cultural and political world into which a person is born not only provides a context for action, it also shapes the way in which that person experiences the world and therefore the way in which he or she acts. Examples abound, but an obvious and strong illustration concerns the notion of personal identity. People in the seventeenth century would speak about identity by describing their status within the hierarchical structure of the society to

60. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 110.

61. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 134, 136.

62. John Galvin, "I Believe...in Jesus Christ, His Only Son, Our Lord": The Earthly Jesus and the Christ of Faith", *Interpretation* 50 (1996) 373-82, see p. 380.

which they belonged. Someone in our century and society would almost always speak about identity by describing an inward sense of self, relating that sense to what they encounter outside of themselves.<sup>63</sup> We go inward to make sense of what is outward, whereas in earlier times a person's identity located them within a social hierarchy. This change reflects not only different understandings of the word identity but also different conceptions of human agency, and hence different ways of experiencing the world.

Since history shapes experience, we correctly understand a person and that person's words and actions, only if we situate them within the context of their time.<sup>64</sup> There will usually be room for a sharper understanding of that person's world and hence of the person himself or herself. But if we place people in the wrong context, or imagine that we can understand them outside of their context, we will certainly misunderstand them, usually by locating them in our own context and ascribing our prejudices to them. People can be correctly understood only against the background of their world. To illustrate the point Charles Taylor offers a simple but striking example: "You see a man waving his hands wildly. Then you look closer, and you see that some nasty flies are swarming around him. His actions become intelligible against his background."<sup>65</sup> The flies may seem a mere detail in the scene but that detail makes the man's action intelligible. A straightjacket found thrown over the back of the man's chair would lead to an entirely different understanding, or at least indicate the need for further enquiry. Gadamer makes the same point about situating a person or an event when he says: "If we fail to place ourselves in this way within the historical horizon...we shall misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us."<sup>66</sup>

The Council of Chalcedon taught that the person of Jesus is "truly God and truly man", and therefore that the risen Jesus is Jesus of Nazareth. For those who hold to this teaching and seek to grasp the significance of Jesus' life, their search cannot be fulfilled without historical exploration of his life and background. The gospels recount the life of Jesus against the background of first-century Palestine, but

---

63. For a developed argument about the changing understanding of identity, see Charles Taylor, "Inwardness and the Culture of Modernity", in Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe and Albrecht Wellmer (eds.) *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993) 88-110. See also, C. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). In his major work Taylor traces the history of the modern identity and the way in which it has been shaped by the momentous transformations of culture and society over the last three or four centuries; see Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

64. See Taylor, "Comparison, History, Truth", *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 153.

65. Taylor, "Comparison, History, Truth", 153.

66. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2d ed.; London: Sheed & Ward, 1979) 270.

because they are written forty to eighty years after the death of Jesus, to audiences that shared many of his cultural understandings, much is assumed in those documents that is not ours and not immediately available to us. To further complicate the issue, the gospels include their authors' agenda for their own particular communities, and this needs to be recognised if not separated out.

Correctly situating Jesus against the background of his world not only provides us with greater detail of his life and of first-century Palestine. More importantly, it allows us to understand better his significance. The example of Jesus' meals in my opening paragraph makes this point.

#### THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE NATURE OF HISTORY

I have argued immediately above that it is only possible to understand Jesus against the background of his world, and therefore that any effort to make sense of his life must turn to history. In this section I want to show, at least in outline, that an historical investigation of Jesus' life (or of any other person, institution or event, for that matter) necessarily involves interpretation. That is, that any history necessarily involves the historian *selecting* information and making sense of that information through *interpretation*. This view of history runs counter to a strong twentieth-century current of thought which has been very influential in shaping the human sciences. The empiricist or positivist view of history attempts to get beyond the circle of human interpretations – to get beyond subjectivity. Taylor sums up the empiricist view in this way: "The attempt is to reconstruct knowledge in such a way that there is no need to make final appeal to readings or judgements which cannot be checked further. That is why the basic building block is the impression or sense-datum."<sup>67</sup>

However, all knowing requires human interpretation and comes from people's perception and reflection. To make this point, N. T. Wright uses the example of Paul's claim, "Christ died for our sins."<sup>68</sup> The phrase "for our sins" is clearly interpretative and so, in the search for pure history, it could be deleted. The word "Christ", too, is interpretative, since it ascribes messiahship to Jesus. So, we are down to "Jesus died", but even here we have not escaped interpretation. As Wright puts it: "three people died outside Jerusalem that afternoon, and we have chosen to mention only one. For that matter, thousands of Jews were crucified by the Romans in the vicinity of Jerusalem during the same century, and we have chosen to mention only one".<sup>69</sup> So what at

67. Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", 18-19.

68. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992) 84.

69. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 84.

first glance could seem a “bare historical fact” reveals a whole complex of interpretations.<sup>70</sup>

That history comes from a perspective, however, does not mean that it is arbitrary or inaccurate, or that there are no facts. Some interpretations make better sense of the totality of the information than others, opening up deeper levels of the meaning of a person’s life, or the meaning of an institution or event. Taylor calls this the “best account”.<sup>71</sup> Some interpretations “get inside” the event better, explaining it with greater clairvoyance. In summary, Wright defines history:

History is primarily the history of human beings, and it attempts to plot, uncover, and understand from the inside the interplay of human intentions and motivations present within a given field of initial investigation. What a positivist would call “the facts” are part, and an inseparable part, of a much larger whole. The move from “fact” to “interpretation” is not a move from the clear to the unclear: events are not mere billiard-balls cannoning into one another, to which different “meanings” or “interpretations” can be attached quite arbitrarily, according to which game is being played. Some “meanings” or “interpretations” will be...more appropriate than others.<sup>72</sup>

History is neither brute data nor arbitrary interpretation.

The above discussion of the nature of history means that studies of the historical Jesus do not turn up raw facts, but rather offer an interpretation of the person of Jesus against his background – an interpretation which will make more or less sense of his life than other interpretations on offer. And if history is understood in the way that I am advocating, historical study of Jesus’ life and ministry is crucial for an accurate understanding of the gospels. It is utterly significant for theology.

Brendan Byrne’s view of the nature of history can be helpfully examined in this context. Against Frei, Byrne argues that the gospel narratives point to a reality beyond themselves. But he then argues that the truth mediated by the gospels depends “a bit but not much” upon the veracity of the history they appear to describe.<sup>73</sup> Byrne’s minimalist understanding of the place of history – “the scant residue of history that

---

70. Tony Kelly makes a similar point about the limitations of empiricist understandings of history in an article, “The Historical Jesus and Human Subjectivity: A Response to John Meier”, *Pacifica* 4 (1991) 212-14.

71. On Taylor’s notion of the BA principle, see *Sources of the Self*, 58 and passim. On arguing from one account to a better account, see Taylor, “Explanation and Practical Reason”, *Philosophical Arguments*, 34-60. Wright makes the same point about the clairvoyance of interpretations in *The New Testament and the People of God*, 91.

72. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 91.

73. Byrne, “Gospel Narrative”, 56, 59.

can reliably be detected behind and through the gospels"<sup>74</sup> – seems governed by an assumption that history is brute data. Yet I have claimed – only in outline, I acknowledge – that an understanding of history as bare facts or brute data misrepresents the nature of history. History involves interpretation. Byrne's view of the relationship between history and narrative suffers because of his view of history.

Yet his is not a rough attempt to deny history a place in the task of christology. It is a nuanced view that holds together the reality to which the gospels refer and their narrative nature. However, the way in which Byrne understands history, and therefore the way in which he frames the relationship between history and narrative, results in history being balanced against or contrasted with the apostolic witness. He sees them as separated by a ditch.<sup>75</sup> Although the ability to recognise the depth of the reality to which the gospels refer is always a gift (the gift of faith), I am arguing that a better understanding of history itself and therefore of its relationship with narrative sees history and narrative not as separated in the way that Byrne does, but recognises their intrinsic relationship.

I am not denying that the gospels reflect the faith and practice of the communities to which they were addressed as well as the theologies of their authors. These factors even shape the way in which the chronology of Jesus' life is presented – at times differently in the different gospels. However, the gospels have significance for the early communities and for us insofar as they relate the reader to the life of Jesus and elucidate the meaning of his life. Coming to grips with this meaning therefore engages us in literary, theological and historical enquiry.

Luke Timothy Johnson's dismissal of historical Jesus studies also suffers because of his judgement about the nature of history. At the nub of Johnson's critique of historical Jesus studies is the view that these scholars distill historical facts, and reconstruct a history of Jesus using the extracted facts. If this is the methodology adopted by some scholars, I have argued above that it is not inherent in the nature of history, nor is it the methodology of other prominent scholars in the field, for example Ben F. Meyer and N. T. Wright among others.<sup>76</sup> Against Johnson's dismissal of historical Jesus studies, I want simply to restate my argument that any interpretation of Jesus' life which does not situate him against the background of his world is necessarily a mis-interpretation. And the task of situating Jesus within his own world is a task in history.

---

74. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 61.

75. Byrne, "Gospel Narrative", 61.

76. Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (see n. 8 above).

Loewe gets closer to the interpretative conception of history when he argues that it is a complex activity, involving the location of sources, the discernment of facts from these sources, and settling on an intelligible image of Jesus in the light of these facts. Although his description of history better approximates the interpretative view of history than do Johnson and Byrne, there is more than the whiff of an empiricist view here, with Loewe's focus on sources and the search for facts, and this influences significant dimensions of his argument. Yet Loewe's judgement that, given the complexity of history, the historical Jesus has limited theological significance, is itself problematic. The interpretative method is all that we have in any of the human sciences – including theology. Because situating Jesus against his background is so important for an accurate understanding of him, history is a necessary foundation and it is far more robust than Loewe allows. I noted earlier that Loewe sees some usefulness in historical Jesus research because historical images of Jesus may provide material for new christological symbols.<sup>77</sup> But in granting this, Loewe does not recognise the fundamental role of historical Jesus research in situating Jesus against the background of his time.

#### THE APOSTOLIC WITNESS AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Loewe's second argument to establish the limited theological significance of the historical Jesus concerns the apostolic witness. Following Tracy, Loewe argues that it is the apostolic witness and not the historical Jesus that is foundational and normative for Christian faith.<sup>78</sup> In Tracy's words, the norm and foundation of christology is "the Jesus remembered by the tradition and community as representative of God's own presence among us".<sup>79</sup> Tracy adds that for that reason, claims that the historical Jesus is the norm for the tradition are confused. He sees the historical Jesus as a relatively external and secondary criterion.<sup>80</sup>

But the strong contrast between the tradition and the historical Jesus is a "false dilemma".<sup>81</sup> That is the position for which Elizabeth Johnson argues – one which I also hold, but for different reasons. The gospel texts are accounts of Jesus' message and manner of life. They do not claim to be history in any contemporary sense of the word, but they do

77. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ", 330.

78. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 238-39. Stephen Duffy argues along similar lines in "Ego Transcendence and Transformation: The Soteriology of Sebastian Moore", in William P. Loewe and Vernon J. Gregson (eds.), *Jesus Crucified and Risen: Essays in Spirituality and Theology in Honor of Dom Sebastian Moore* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 47-52.

79. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 239.

80. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 239.

81. Elizabeth Johnson, "Theological Relevance", 29. Johnson says: "It seems to me, however, that the stringent posing of such a definitive contrast between the tradition and the historical Jesus sets up a choice which is basically a false dilemma."

claim to be accurate interpretations of Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection. The early communities' respect for these texts and their placement in the Canon (as well as the exclusion of others) not only reflects the faith of those communities, it also inherently claims that the included texts are the best, most accurate interpretations of the meaning of Jesus' life. So, to make a definitive contrast between the historical Jesus and the apostolic witness is self-contradictory, since the apostolic witness is itself an interpretation of the historical Jesus. Such a definitive contrast would make sense for those who hold a positivist view of history but, as I have argued above, such a positivist view of history is untenable. Certainly, the apostolic witness is a privileged interpretation in the Christian tradition, but removing it from the realm of history misrepresents Christian faith, and grants victory to an unacknowledged historical portrait of Jesus.

For us who live at a distance of two millennia from him, historical exploration of the life of Jesus is critical. To paraphrase Gadamer: If we fail to place ourselves in Jesus' historical horizon, we shall misunderstand the significance of what he has to say to us.<sup>82</sup>

---

82. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 270.