

## Why Historicity Still Matters: Raymond Brown and the Infancy Narratives

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Gregory W. Dawes

**Abstract:** The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke pose in an acute form the question of the historical value of the Gospels. Raymond Brown suggests that redaction criticism can bypass this question by spelling out the theological message intended by the evangelists. But his own exegesis suggests this is to misunderstand the genre of this literature. Brown's indifference to historicity would be justified only if the evangelists were writing something resembling allegory, a form of narrative in which the literal sense of the story is the (dispensable) clothing of a spiritual message. But Brown's exegesis suggests that the evangelists do not regard the literal sense of these stories as dispensable; they regard their theological message as resting on a foundation of historical fact. It follows that if interpreters focus on the intention of the evangelists, they cannot avoid addressing the question of historicity.

### INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE CRITICAL STUDY of the Gospels, the interpretation of the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke has raised complex problems for the interpreter. For among all the stories which the Gospels relate, it is the infancy narratives which pose in the most acute form the question of the historical value of the Gospel narratives.

In the early nineteenth century, David Friedrich Strauss had already decided that these narratives contain little or no historical fact. In discussing, for instance, the story of the magi (Matt 2:1-12), Strauss opposed what he described as the traditional, "supernatural" interpretation, which he regards as entirely incredible.<sup>1</sup> But he argued equally strongly against the then fashionable ("rationalist") view that

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1. David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1840; Ramsey NJ: Sigler Press, 1994) 171.

there was a core of non-miraculous, historical fact in these narratives. Strauss rejected the rationalist view, since, as he writes,

if the writer or legend be capable of environing occurrences with fictitious motives and accessory circumstances, either the one or the other is also capable of fabricating the occurrences themselves, and this fabrication is the more probable, the more clearly we can show that the legend had an interest in depicting such occurrences, though they had never actually taken place.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, it is more likely that the entire narrative is “mythical”. But this means that it tells us nothing about the life of Jesus himself. All it tells us is how the earliest Christians regarded him.<sup>3</sup>

A later generation of scholars, influenced by form criticism, were quick to note that these stories have the mark of the legendary. Martin Dibelius, for instance, speaks of the “four independent legends” that have become woven together in Luke’s infancy narrative,<sup>4</sup> and the combination of an originally independent “legend of the magi” with that of the slaughter of the children in Matthew 2.<sup>5</sup> In common with all legends, these stories are full of human interest, and focus on apparently secondary details and persons.<sup>6</sup> Dibelius notes that similar imaginative expansions of historical memories mark the development of many religious traditions (citing as an example a story about the Buddha as an infant).<sup>7</sup> This suggests that the development of legends follows the same law at quite different times and in widely separated cultures.<sup>8</sup>

For many Christian interpreters, these conclusions were disturbing. If the infancy narratives were “myth” or “legend”, what religious value could they have? But in recent years the practice of redaction criticism has appeared to offer an alternative, more theologically edifying view. By focusing on what the authors or editors of these narratives were intending to convey to their audience, redaction criticism has enabled scholars to set aside the issue of historical reference. Whatever else the evangelists were intending to convey by crafting these narratives, they were certainly intending to convey a religious message. What redaction criticism has offered biblical scholars is the opportunity to expound that

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2. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 172.

3. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 177.

4. Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* rev. 2nd ed. of *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (1933; Library of Theological Translations; Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1971) 123.

5. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 128-29.

6. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 132.

7. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 127.

8. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 128.

message – with the none too subtle implication that it is still true<sup>9</sup> – while allowing for the possibility that few, if any, of these events actually occurred.

“Here’s the religious message. The stories may be largely fictional, but it doesn’t matter.” That, in a nutshell, is the message conveyed by many redaction-critical studies. There is no doubt that this is a theologically attractive position; what I want to ask is whether it is a consistent one. In setting aside the question of historicity in order to isolate the evangelists’ theological concerns, are redaction critics being true to what they themselves claim is the object of their study? If the aim of redaction criticism is the discovery of that which the writers (or editors) of the Gospels intended to convey to their audiences,<sup>10</sup> then can redaction critics ignore the question of the historicity of the stories? Does historicity still matter?

It might be objected that redaction criticism is only one of many possible approaches to the Gospels. That is true, but it is a widespread and popular one. It might be argued, too, that even redaction criticism is concerned with history. That is also true. But redaction criticism is not interested in the historical accuracy of these texts. The history in which it is interested is that of the text’s composition. It is true, too, that in some circles even this modest degree of historical interest has become unfashionable. Many biblical scholars refer to what literary critics have long called the “intentional fallacy”,<sup>11</sup> the idea that the meaning of a work is to be identified with what its author intended. They remind us that texts can have meanings that go far beyond authorial intent. I have no wish to dispute these insights. All I wish to note is that many other scholars remain wedded to the idea that authorial intent should play a controlling role in its exegesis.<sup>12</sup> The question I am raising is: Can one hold to this latter view – can one claim to be expounding what the evangelists intended – while remaining indifferent to the historicity of the events they narrate?

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9. Jacques Berlinerblau, “The Unspeakable in Biblical Scholarship”, SBL Online Forum (<http://www.sbl-site.org>), 2006.

10. For a summary of the aims of redaction criticism, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (New York NY: Doubleday, 1994) 4-13.

11. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) in William K. Wimsatt (ed.), *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954) 3-18.

12. For a sophisticated defence of the role of authorial intent, and a response to Wimsatt and Beardsley, see E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1967).

## WHAT I AM NOT DOING

In pursuing this question I shall take Raymond Brown's study of the infancy narratives as exemplary.<sup>13</sup> Let me begin by avoiding some possible misunderstandings. I am not questioning the results of Brown's exegesis. I shall assume that his results are substantially correct, that he has identified what the authors of these narratives intended to convey to their audiences. In this respect, I greatly admire Brown's indefatigable detective work. Nor do I wish to dispute Brown's generally negative judgements regarding the historicity of these stories. He produces excellent reasons to believe that there probably were no magi, that there probably was no star, and so on. I have no personal difficulty with these conclusions. What I wish to dispute is Brown's assumption that these negative conclusions regarding historicity have no theological significance, that we can embrace the theological significance of these stories while no longer believing that the events they relate really occurred.

I am aware that I am not the only person to question this assumption. There are theologically conservative commentators – with whom I otherwise have little in common – who raise similar concerns. Their conclusion would be that we must regard these stories as reports of actual events, for they would otherwise lose their religious significance. I think that such commentators have sound theological instincts, but I have no desire to embrace their conclusion. I agree with Brown that for the most part we cannot regard these stories as historically accurate. But if it is true that the religious significance of these stories depends on their historicity, what follows? Well, my own view resembles that of David Friedrich Strauss, who famously (or notoriously) concludes that such stories could no longer have any religious use.<sup>14</sup> Is there a more edifying conclusion? Perhaps there is, but to be blunt, I feel under no obligation to produce one.

## BROWN'S HERMENEUTICAL INTENTIONS

What, then, is Raymond Brown's attitude towards the infancy narratives. His intention in undertaking his work is clear from his introduction: he is hoping to rehabilitate these stories for Christian use. He begins by recognising that historical criticism of the Gospels has cast

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13. Brown's volume dates from 1976, but a revised edition (containing the original text and a supplement) was published in 1993: Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993). Where page numbers are cited in the text, they are references to this work.

14. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, §152 (pp.171-74).

doubt on the religious value of these texts. All too often it has given the impression that the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus are “legends unworthy to be a vehicle of the pure Gospel message”, a “folklore devoid of real theology...fit only for romantics or the naive” (p. 7). Brown concedes that the historical judgement behind such statements is largely correct: “it is unlikely that either account [Matthew’s or Luke’s] is completely historical”, and the historical value of these narratives can be rescued only in respect of certain details (pp. 36-37). However, although this “‘hard-nosed’ probing of historicity” was necessary, with the rise of redaction criticism we have entered upon “a more fruitful stage of research” (p. 37). What such criticism shows us, Brown argues, is that historical reference is not the “primary interest” of the evangelists, who are seeking “to teach Christians about [Jesus’] identity and role” (p. 576). In other words, the infancy narratives should be read as vehicles of a religious message. As Brown writes, “one is hard pressed to find elsewhere in the Gospels theology so succinctly and imaginatively presented” (p. 38). Regarded as expressions of early Christian theology, “the infancy narratives are not an embarrassment but a masterpiece” (p. 38).<sup>15</sup>

This is an excellent example of the kind of edifying conclusion upon which I wish to cast some doubt. The problem I want to highlight is this. To say that the infancy narratives are a “dramatization” of the evangelists’ theology (pp. 253, 269, 346), or that they present a religious message in “symbolic” form (p. 272 n.2, p. 285),<sup>16</sup> is to suggest that the evangelists were writing something resembling an allegory, a form of narrative in which the literal sense of the story is the (dispensable) clothing of a spiritual message. If this were the case, then it is easy to see why these narratives would no longer be an embarrassment. The fact that they are largely fictitious need not bother the reader. Since they are

15. This concern for the contemporary appropriation of these stories is also evident in the foreword to the updated edition of the book. Here Brown remarks of the first edition that he was “very encouraged by the reception given that work, especially on the part of those who wrote or told me that it made the Gospel infancy narratives truly meaningful” (p. 9).

16. I have not illustrated this tendency in detail. It is implicit in the remarks I have cited and will be familiar to any reader of *The Birth of the Messiah*. Here is one example (with references to others). Brown recognises the historical implausibility of the idea that John the Baptist was related to Jesus (Luke 1:36). But he argues that this does not matter, since this claim is entirely intelligible “as a symbolic Lucan etiology of the historical relationship between the JBap movement and the Jesus movement” (p. 285). He makes analogous remarks about the genealogies of Jesus (pp. 85, 94), the story of the magi (pp. 188-96), the annunciations of John the Baptist (p. 268) and of Jesus (pp. 296-98), the story of the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (p. 346), Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus (p. 555), and of the child Jesus in the Temple (p. 483). In each case the recognition that these stories (in their present form) are historically improbable is offset by a claim regarding their theological significance.

(if you like) parables rather than historical reports, their fictive character is no more of a scandal than the fact that there (presumably) was no Good Samaritan.

What is the problem here? The problem is that this optimistic conclusion is implicitly and explicitly contradicted by Brown's own exegesis. That exegesis suggests that Matthew and Luke were not writing something resembling an allegory. Rather, they were constructing narratives that they intended the reader to believe were grounded in actual events. If this is the case, then a recognition of the evangelists' intention in relating these stories raises once again the question of historicity. Brown rightly insists that historicity was not the "primary concern" of the evangelists (p. 576). I have no wish to dispute this. But with one telling exception, he fails to recognise the significance of his own exegesis. That exegesis suggests that the evangelists' theological message rests upon a foundation of taken-for-granted historicity. It entails that these events should actually have occurred. If they did not – and I agree that they probably didn't – then the theology has no foundation at all.

#### INTENDED HISTORICAL REFERENCE

In spelling out this argument, I wish to make use of a key distinction, although it is difficult to know just how to express it. I have suggested that Raymond Brown often treats the infancy narratives as though they were something like an extended allegory. So perhaps the best place to begin is with the distinction between a text written as a (mere) allegory and a text written as an account of actual events. This distinction has to do with the status of the literal sense of the narrative. When one writes an allegory, one is writing an account whose literal meaning serves as the vehicle of a message. The meaning the words are intended to convey is not that which they literally denote, but something else, which they are intended to represent.<sup>17</sup> Like metaphor (in this respect at least), allegory is characterised by a kind of double signification: there exist two levels of meaning, two ways in which the text can be read. In the first instance the passage can and must be read in its literal sense, for the literal sense, we may say, "carries" the meaning. But the referential function of the literal sense (its "truth-value", if you like) is suspended.

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17. This is a broad definition, which could include what we would normally refer to as "parable". However, for the purposes of this study, "allegory" is a better description of the way in which Brown often speaks about the infancy narratives. For allegory and parable, see Davies and Allison's discussion of the Gospel parables (*Matthew* 2:378-82), where they reject the attempt – made by Jülicher, Dodd, and Jeremias – to make a sharp distinction between parable and allegory.

It is not *necessary* that the narrative be literally true for its intended meaning to be successfully conveyed.

In the case of a report that is intended to be understood as a report of actual events, there may also be two levels of signification. In other words, the text may have a meaning that goes beyond the relating of the events to which it refers. In religious contexts we may say it has a theological significance. But in this case the referential function of the literal sense is not suspended. The text may have a theological significance, but the theological significance is carried, not by the very words of the narrative, but by the *events* to which the narrative purportedly refers. It follows that if the events did not in fact occur, the theological message is without foundation.

One might object that this distinction would not have been as clear to the evangelists as it is to us. It is true that the evangelists were familiar with allegory, in the sense in which I am using the word.<sup>18</sup> That much is clear from the parable of the sower, which – whatever its original form<sup>19</sup> – is *interpreted* as an allegory in Matt 13:18-23 (par. Mark 4:13-20 and Luke 8:11-15). Therefore one cannot argue that the New Testament writers were opposed to allegory,<sup>20</sup> or were unfamiliar with this form of writing. But I know of no one (other than, perhaps, the maverick Australian scholar Barbara Thiering<sup>21</sup>) who would argue that the evangelists intended *everything* they wrote to be read as allegory. It seems they intended at least some of their stories to be read as reports of actual events, however charged these events may be with theological significance. We may therefore argue that the evangelists must have been at least *implicitly* aware of the distinction between these two forms of writing.

However, to be implicitly aware of a distinction is one thing; to make use of it in an explicit and self-conscious manner is quite another. It may be, as Ulrich Luz argues, that in the predominantly oral culture from which the gospels emerged such distinctions were rarely made

18. See R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM, 1959) 77: "The existence of allegorical interpretations of some of the parables of Jesus in the Gospels does...show that allegory was in the mind of the earliest Christians."

19. Two recent commentators, W. D. Davies and Dale Allison (*The Gospel According to St Matthew* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988] 2:396-99) are prepared to entertain the suggestion that the interpretation the evangelists give may go back to Jesus himself.

20. James Barr (*Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments* [London: SCM, 1966] 109-10) argues against the (once commonly expressed) idea that the New Testament were somehow opposed to allegory (on principle), suggesting that they did read some Old Testament texts in a way which we would describe as "allegorical" (cf. e.g. 1 Cor 9:9).

21. Barbara Thiering, *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1992; Sydney: Bantam Books, 1993) 28-35.

explicit.<sup>22</sup> In Christian history such distinctions were first clearly enunciated (although with some terminological confusion<sup>23</sup>) within the highly literate culture of the Church Fathers.<sup>24</sup> It would be unwise to attribute too much self-consciousness in these matters to the evangelists, writing, as they were, in a very different context.

What I want to argue, on the basis of Brown's exegesis, is that the evangelists were writing stories that they intended to be understood as reports of actual events. But the question I am raising here is: Are we in a position to make such a judgement? If the oral culture in which the evangelists were writing did not make clear distinctions between genres, can we hope to determine what they were intending to do? In their commentary on Matthew's Gospel, W. D. Davies and Dale Allison discuss this very issue:

Matthew, we can be sure, believed in the virginal conception of Jesus. This fact, however, does not tell us whether he thought of his infancy narrative as being solid, sober history. The issue, of course, admits of no straightforward resolution, in part because his thoughts are not our thoughts: he could hardly have operated with modern ideas of history and fiction. Nonetheless, it is worth asking, Did Matthew not recognise the haggadic, indeed the poetic, character of his narrative?... if our author knew, as he must have, that Jesus' parables, unlike, say, the passion narrative, were in no way historical, he would have been able, at least in some rudimentary fashion, to understand the difference between fact and edifying fiction. But unfortunately, this is as far as we can go. Whether Matthew was persuaded that his infancy traditions...were more poetry than prose, how could one decide?<sup>25</sup>

However, this way of posing the question is misleading. Did Matthew and Luke think of their infancy narratives as "solid, sober history"?

22. Ulrich Luz, "Fiktivität und Traditionstreue im Matthäusevangelium im Lichte griechischer Literatur", *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1993) 163-64.

23. Joseph Mazzeo, *Varieties of Interpretation* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978) 48-49.

24. See, for instance, Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentary on the allegory found in Galatians 4 (English text in *Biblical Interpretation* ed. Joseph W. Trigg [Message of the Fathers of the Church 9; Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1988] 173; surviving Latin text in H. B. Swete [ed.], *Theodori Episcopi Mopsuesteni in Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii: The Latin Version with the Greek Fragments* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1880] 73-74). Augustine echoes this view in his commentary on the same text in *De Trinitate* 9.15 (English text in *Augustine: Later Works* LCC VIII [London: SCM, 1955] 143; Latin text in *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, 16 [Bibliothèque Augustienne; Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1955] 460).

25. Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 1:221.

Almost certainly not. Whatever “solid, sober history” is, it is surely a modern concept. It would not include angelic annunciations, wandering stars, and virginal conceptions. Did Matthew and Luke employ our “ideas of history and fiction”? Almost certainly not, if by “our ideas of history and fiction” one means *the criteria we would employ for judging historical plausibility*. But as Davies and Allison concede, the evangelists were presumably aware of “the difference between fact and edifying fiction”. And the distinction between fact and edifying fiction is precisely the distinction to which I am alluding. After all, Davies and Allison feel confident enough about Matthew’s intentions to affirm that he believed there was a virginal conception. (Matthew may have been wrong, but the claim he *believed* his report was true.) So it is apparently not impossible for us to make such judgements.

In any case, all I am doing here is examining Raymond Brown’s discussion. What I am arguing is that, despite his tendency to downplay questions of historicity, Brown’s exegesis suggests that Matthew and Luke *were* intending their stories to be understood as referring to actual events. In company with Davies and Allison, Brown affirms this explicitly with regard to one event, namely the virginal conception of Jesus. But the same conclusion is implicit in his discussion of other passages. If his exegesis is wrong – if Matthew and Luke were intending merely to craft elaborate allegories – then I shall have demonstrated an inconsistency in Raymond Brown’s thought. Given what he believes about the evangelists’ intentions, he should be more concerned about historicity than he apparently is. But if, as I believe, Brown is right – if Matthew and Luke *were* intending these stories to be read as reports of actual events – then historicity does still matter. For the evangelists’ theological message not only takes the accuracy of these reports for granted; it actually *requires* that they be accurate. If they are not accurate, the Christian interpreter may be in trouble.

#### THE INFANCY NARRATIVES

It goes without saying that Matthew and Luke believed their accounts to have theological significance. What they wished to communicate to their readers was a certain vision of the identity of this child whose birth they describe. The key question is: Did they *also* intend their accounts to be understood as reports of actual events? In answering this question, I shall restrict myself to Raymond Brown’s exegesis. For what I am arguing is that the results of his exegesis undermine his expressed hermeneutical aims. So what does Brown’s exegesis suggest about the intended historical reference of the infancy narratives?

## Explicit Claims Regarding (Intended) Historicity

Let me begin by clarifying what I mean by “intended historical reference”. I am using the word “reference” here in the sense in which the philosopher Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) used the term *Bedeutung*. In his 1892 paper, *Sinn und Bedeutung*, Frege distinguished between the “sense” of a term and its “referent”. The difference can be grasped intuitively by way of Frege’s best-known example. At different times, the planet Venus is described as both “the morning star” and “the evening star”. Each of these phrases has a different sense (*Sinn*), but since their object is the same, they have the same referent (*Bedeutung*).<sup>26</sup> So when I speak of the intended historical referent of a narrative, what I am speaking of are the events that this narrative purports to relate. If we assume for the moment that Matthew and Luke are intending to report actual events, I can illustrate Frege’s distinction by using a more familiar example. Matthew and Luke offer different accounts of the virginal conception of Jesus. But the difference lies in the sense of these accounts. We may assume that they are both intended to have the same historical referent. Incidentally, this distinction enables us to spell out what biblical scholars mean when they speak about the “historicity” of a text. The historicity of a text – at least as I am using this term – is nothing other than its actual historical reference.

But in using the term “intended historical reference” I am relying on a second distinction, that between the *intended* and *actual* historical reference of a narrative. We may judge, for instance, that there probably was no event corresponding to Matthew’s story of the visit of the magi (Matt 2:1-12). To make this judgement is to say that there is a failure of *actual* historical reference. The text tells a story to which no events directly correspond. The story may, of course, make *indirect* reference to other events, such as the reception of the Gospel by the Gentiles in the decades following the death of Jesus (pp. 179-83). In other words, the fictitious magi of the story may *represent* other characters, who did exist, namely the Gentile Christians of Matthew’s community. But indirect reference is a mark of something resembling allegory. On the level of its literal meaning, the text fails to refer, even if the fictional characters and events spoken by the text correspond to actual characters and events of another time and place. So I should perhaps be more precise here and speak of a failure of *direct* historical reference.

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26. Gottlob Frege, “Sense and Reference” (1892), tr. Max Black, *The Philosophical Review* 57 (1948) 210.

My point is that this is quite a different question from that of what the evangelists were intending to do, or, more precisely, how they were intending their readers to understand their words. We may well judge that these stories do not in fact refer to actual events – that the alleged events they describe never occurred – while still arguing that they were *intended* to do so. In this case we would be arguing that there was an intended historical reference, but that this intended reference *fails*. Matthew intended his readers to believe that there were magi, but we would judge that there probably were none. At best we might say that there were “magi”: Gentile Christians of a later age of whom the magi of the story may be taken as symbols. But if Matthew intended his readers to believe that there *were* magi who visited Jesus at his birth, this judgement implies a failure of an *intended* direct historical reference.

This distinction between intended and actual historical reference is a fundamental one, but it is entirely absent from Brown’s analysis. In his exegesis of many of these stories, Brown is certainly denying (with due caution) *actual* historical reference. Whatever may originally have happened, it is unlikely to be exactly what Matthew and Luke relate. In their present form, these stories are the creation of the evangelists and their communities. In some of his explicit statements regarding the genre of the infancy narratives, Brown also seems to be denying *intended* historicity. He argues, for instance, that the “historical character” of the Gospels, affirmed by the Second Vatican Council (*Dei Verbum* §19), “must be understood in a modified sense – modified by the manner of transmission and the intent of the evangelists which was not to write literal history” (p. 562 n.11). The problem here is that Brown never clarifies what the evangelists were intending to do. Were they intending to write a “non-literal” history? What would this be? Is it a “symbolic history”, which would convey a theological meaning without ceasing to have an intended historical referent? Or is it an account that has no intended historical reference?

The same lack of clarity is to be found in the other passages in which Brown discusses these issues. For instance, Brown’s response to his (mainly conservative) critics at first sight appears to deny *intended* historicity.

In my judgement an obsession with “proving” historicity is regressive, forcing prolonged discussion of areas in which the evangelists show no primary interest. The problem boils down to one’s basic presupposition. I presuppose only that the two evangelists, in presenting the story of Jesus’ conception, wished to teach Christians about his identity and role. I make no prejudgment about the type of literature in which they have chosen to do this. If the Bible is a library containing many different types of literature, one may not presuppose that the infancy narratives

are histories, as some do. The person who asserts historicity has as much to prove as the person who opts for a nonhistorical classification, and both must be aware that there is a wide range of classification between history and fiction (p. 576).

But note the ambivalence here. The evangelists' *primary* interest is not in the question of historicity; a secondary interest is apparently not excluded. Elsewhere Brown rejects the idea that "history or biography was the dominant optic of the evangelist, and also that the evangelist could tell whether the stories he included had a historical origin" (p. 34). Once again, we read that history was not the *dominant* optic of the evangelists, a cautious statement that does not exclude a secondary concern with historicity.

All in all, it is difficult to gain a clear picture of what Brown is affirming. But the general thrust of his comments is that the evangelists are primarily interested in theology and have only a secondary interest in history. But apparently they do have an interest in history, however secondary this may be. Revealingly, Brown makes this quite clear when it comes to his discussion of the virginal conception of Jesus, a story which (interestingly) he himself believes to have some actual historical basis. In one place he writes:

while Like stresses the supernatural element in the "How" more eloquently than Matthew does, neither author has the kind of biological interest in the virginal conception that marks subsequent discussions. In my judgment, both Matthew and Luke think that Jesus was conceived without human father, but are more interested in theological import than in historicity (p. 140 n.22).

In another, he argues that

the question of historicity goes beyond the intentions of Matthew and Luke which were my primary concern in the body of the commentary. By saying this, I do not imply that Matthew and Luke presented the virginal conception only as a symbol or were indifferent to what really took place. I think that both of them regarded the virginal conception as historical, but the modern intensity about historicity was not theirs (p. 517).

Brown is thus quite clear about the *intended* historicity of the accounts of the virginal conception. Both Matthew and Luke intended *this particular story* to be understood as a report of actual events. But what about the rest of the infancy narratives? Brown could be saying that the evangelists intended that *only* the story of the virginal conception be

understood as history. But this would be an odd position to adopt. There is no evidence that the evangelists had an interest in the historicity of this one story alone. Presumably if they wanted their readers to understand that this story had a factual basis, they wanted their other stories to be understood in the same way.

What about the relationship between the evangelists' (primary) theological concerns and their (secondary) historical interests? Does Brown give any hint what he believes this might be? In particular, is the former dependent on the latter, so that questioning (actual) historicity might undermine the theology? Regarding the virginal conception, Brown admits that this is a "delicate question". (Strictly speaking, of course, it is not one he is faced with, since he believes that this story does have a factual basis.) He writes:

In evaluating [the evangelists'] testimony on the virginal conception, it is important to realize that in and through this concept the evangelists are making a christological affirmation about Jesus as Son of God and son of David. They presuppose a biological virginity, but that is not the main point of their affirmation. Thus, a Christian who wishes to give proper respect to the evangelists' teaching is still faced with the delicate question as to whether a questioning of the biological presupposition brings into question the main christological affirmation (pp. 528-29).

But on the next page Brown ventures an answer. In discussing the ancient charge that Jesus was illegitimate – the most common alternative to belief in the virginal conception (p. 530) – Brown notes that "illegitimacy would destroy the images of sanctity and purity with which Matthew and Luke surround Jesus' origins and would negate the theology that Jesus came from the pious Anawim of Israel" (p. 530). So here at least Brown's position seems clear. Not only does the evangelist (in this case, Luke) intend the story of the virginal conception to be understood as having a factual basis (*intended* historicity), but also his theology is dependent on the accuracy of his account (*actual* historicity). But what about those stories (such as that of the magi) whose actual historicity Brown denies but whose theology he vigorously affirms? On that question, Brown is silent.<sup>27</sup>

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27. In a revealing phrase, which I have already cited, Brown speaks of theology being "dramatized" in the Lucan infancy narrative (pp. 253, 269, 346). But it would be more accurate to speak of theology being "historicized", in the sense that a history of Jesus' infancy is created out of the evangelist's theology. But as Ernst Käsemann pointed out ("The Problem of the Historical Jesus" in Gregory W. Dawes [ed.], *The Historical Jesus Quest: A Foundational Anthology* [Leiden: Deo Publishing, 1999] 291), the act of creating a

## Implicit Claims Regarding (Intended) Historicity

Even apart from such explicit statements, there are many places in which Brown's exegesis implies the *intended* (although not necessarily the *actual*) historicity of these stories. Particularly significant is Brown's repeated claim that Matthew wishes to demonstrate a divine plan in history (pp. 68-69, 118, 142, 150, 217). This plan, Brown argues, is revealed in the correspondences between Old Testament prophecies or narratives and the stories Matthew relates concerning the conception and birth of Jesus. We see this intention, first of all, in the genealogy of Jesus. For Matthew, the genealogy "reflects the working out of God's plan of creation in the history of salvation" (p. 68); it shows that "God planned from the beginning and with precision the Messiah's origins" (p. 80). As Brown writes, "Matthew expresses awe at this providential plan in 1:17 where he explains that the genealogy of the Messiah can be divided into three sections of fourteen generations each and that each section matches nicely a major portion of salvation history" (pp. 68-69).

As it happens, Brown regards neither Matthew's nor Luke's genealogy of Jesus as historically reliable (pp. 74, 92, 94). He must therefore find a way of affirming that their theological significance is not diminished by their failure to correspond to the facts. With regard to the incompatibility between Matthew's genealogy and Luke's, he writes:

It is possible to have conflicting genealogies of the same person if those genealogies have different functions. Only one or neither of them may be historical in terms of traceable biological lineage, but both of them may be accurate in terms of the function they serve, e.g., Matthew's intention to show that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah, and Luke's intention to show that Jesus is the Son of God (p. 85).

But to say that both genealogies may be theologically accurate, while suggesting that neither of them may be historically accurate, is to assume that these two kinds of accuracy can be separated. It is to assume that the theological function of these genealogies is independent of their historical accuracy. But if this were true, why would the evangelists produced *genealogies* in order to transmit their message?

In a similar way, Brown writes of Matthew's "awe" at the marvels of divine providence (p. 68). But this awe was surely misplaced if divine providence did not arrange things as Matthew narrates. Can we imagine

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history (where none previously existed) shows that the evangelist believes history to be theologically significant.

the first evangelist responding to modern criticisms by saying, "Oh yes, you're right. There weren't three sets of fourteen generations after all. But it doesn't matter. Look how carefully God planned things"? The response makes little sense. It is precisely this alleged pattern that – according to Brown – is the object of Matthew's awe. If there was no such pattern, there is nothing to marvel at. It is true that the evangelist did not have what Brown calls a "Western scientific mind" (p. 82 n.47). But this is beside the point. You do not need a "Western scientific mind" to see that if history did not unfold as Matthew relates, his theological intention is defeated.

Brown argues that the same concern to demonstrate a plan of God in history is evident in Matthew's claims regarding the fulfilment of Scripture. For instance, Matthew added the citation of Isaiah 7:14 to his story of the virginal conception "to show that the continuation of the Davidic line by virginal conception had long been an aspect of the divine plan revealed through the prophets" (p. 118; see also p. 142).<sup>28</sup> In Matthew's eyes, what Isaiah 7:14 shows is that "the same Lord who had laid out the genealogical record of the Messiah with meticulous mathematics (1:17) had planned the Who and the How of the genesis of the Messiah down to the last detail" (p. 150). This, of course, assumes that the "how" of the genesis of the Messiah occurred in the way in which Matthew tells us. For it makes no sense to say that the Scriptures were fulfilled (in this very particular sense) if the events Matthew relates did not in fact occur.

But for precisely this reason Brown's claims regarding another Scriptural citation are problematic. Discussing Matthew's reference to Jer 31:15 (Matt 2:18), Brown writes that "a modern interpreter may regard Matthew's exegesis of Jeremiah as fanciful (and, in fact, incorrect, as regards the burial place of Rachel...); but it is an exegesis that detects a divine master plan of salvation" (p. 217). What is the force of the conjunction "but" here? Is Brown saying that although Matthew's exegesis is "fanciful", even "incorrect", it remains correct in identifying the existence of "a divine master plan of salvation"? How could this be? For what Matthew is asserting is that the divine plan is revealed *in Scripture* when it is interpreted in this way. It follows that if Matthew's interpretation is incorrect, there is no divine plan. The theological claim is dependent on the exegetical. If Matthew's exegesis is faulty, then so is his theology.

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28. Since Brown believes there probably was a virginal conception (actual historicity), he does not, on this occasion, have to explain how Matthew's theology can survive the defeat of his historical claims. But it remains true that, on Brown's exegesis, Matthew is relating what he wants his readers to understand as actual events (intended historicity).

There is another comment that Brown makes which sheds some light on the question of the intention of the evangelists. On a number of occasions Brown refers to ways in which Matthew and Luke's accounts would be "plausible" to a contemporary audience (118, 170, 189–90, 227–28). With regard to the magi story (Matt 2:1–12), for instance, Brown notes that

there are plausibilities in the Matthean narrative. There was an expectation that a ruler of the world would come from Judea. There were remarkable astronomical phenomena in the period around the birth of Jesus. There was a general interest in astrology and in the relation of celestial events to human destiny. Magi were famous among both Jews and Gentiles as having special powers, good and bad. There were instances in the first century of potentates from the East bringing regal gifts to Jerusalem and Rome.... But this constitutes evidence of verisimilitude, not of history. Inclusion of these details would make Matthew's story intelligible and would be a natural way of expression (pp. 189-90).

Brown makes an analogous remark about the story of the massacre of the children (Matt 2:13-23). As he writes, "Matthew's story would not be fantastic to the reader who knew the history of Herodian times" (p. 228). But why was it important to the evangelists that the story *not* be fantastic? And what kind of plausibility were they aiming to achieve? With regard to the magi story, Brown writes:

Christians, sharing the general belief that celestial phenomena marked the birth of great men, may have reflected on astronomical peculiarities at the time of Jesus' birth...and, in retrospect, may have fastened on one or the other as a sign from God that His Son was going to be born (p. 190).

The implication here is that the early Christians believed there were such "astronomical peculiarities" and decided, in retrospect, that one of these was a sign from God. It is true that Brown has already decided – rightly, to my mind – that the story of the wandering star that guided the magi is probably a fiction (pp. 190-96), crafted on the basis of (among other things) the prophecy of Balaam (Num 24:17). But that it is actually fictional is, for these purposes, neither here nor there. The point is that the early Christians found this story plausible, because they already knew (or thought they knew) of odd astronomical phenomena at the time of Jesus' birth. In other words, they found it plausible because they knew of real events, one of which apparently corresponded to that

narrated by the story. The intended plausibility of which Brown speaks is apparently *historical* plausibility: the possibility that the events narrated might actually have occurred.

Less decisive, but worth remarking on, is Brown's discussion of why it is that both Matthew and Luke remove the magi (Matthew) and the shepherds (Luke) as quickly as possible from the scene of the nativity (pp. 196, 429). Both groups are believers who have reacted in faith to the announcement of Jesus' birth. But the evangelists know that "historically, there were no such believers present when Jesus' ministry opened with the baptism" (p. 196; cf. 429). That is why it is important that the magi return home and that the shepherds return to their fields. Again, Brown's comments admit of varying interpretations. He is apparently saying that both Matthew and Luke wished to craft a coherent narrative. But why? It could be for merely aesthetic reasons. They may have wanted their story to be coherent even though they did not intend it as a report of actual events. But it seems more likely that the evangelists wanted their story to be coherent because if it were not coherent, it would not be historically plausible.<sup>29</sup> The removal of the magi and the shepherds from the scene of Jesus' birth would be particularly "imperative" (p. 196) if the evangelists wished their readers to understand their infancy narratives as reports of actual events.<sup>30</sup>

#### The Infancy Narratives in Context

So is this what the evangelists intended? Let us approach this question from a different point of view. Most scholars assume that the evangelists intended that we understand their reports of Jesus' *ministry and death* as reports of actual events. Brown shares this view. In his more recent work on the passion narratives, he rejects the idea that "Christians had no interest in historical raw material",<sup>31</sup> and argues that the "early Christians...not only could but did remember basic items in

29. As R. G. Collingwood writes (*The Idea of History* [1946; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961] 246), one of the marks of history as opposed to fiction is that "all history must be consistent with itself".

30. At this point, of course, one is tempted to say that these stories are a kind of "pious fraud", a conscious fabrication of what purports to be a history, albeit with edifying intent. Did the evangelists believe their own, carefully crafted stories? Perhaps they did, for reasons I shall reflect on shortly. Our human capacity for self-deception never fails to surprise.

31. Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 15. See also p. 51: "there is history underlying the Gospel PNs [Passion Narratives] – there was not massive Christian indifference as to what actually happened at the end of Jesus' life". Of course, the first part of this statement is apparently about *actual* historical reference, the second about *intended* historical reference. Here Brown seems to be affirming both.

sequence about the death of Jesus".<sup>32</sup> If the evangelists were concerned about history when it came to ministry and death of Jesus, why would they not be concerned about history in their accounts of his birth? Brown is right to remind us that "if the Bible is a library containing many different types of literature, one may not presuppose that the infancy narratives are histories" (p. 576). But to regard the infancy narratives as something like elaborate allegories is to assume that Matthew and Luke wanted their readers to understand different parts of their gospels in radically different ways. Is this likely?

In principle, this possibility cannot be excluded. But it does seem unlikely. For if this is what the evangelists intended, there is no evidence of this intent in their Gospels. There exists no authorial hint in the infancy narratives of either Matthew or Luke that these stories are to be read differently from the rest of their Gospels. There is nothing which resembles the *ho anaginôskôn noitô* ("Let the reader understand!") which offers the reader of Matt 24:15 some interpretative guidance (compare Mark 13:14). Nor do Matthew and Luke preface their infancy narratives with a statement which resembles the apostle Paul's *hatina estin allêgoroumena* (Gal 4:24: "these things are spoken allegorically"), which would warn the reader to avoid a naïvely literal reading of these stories.<sup>33</sup> More precisely, they offer no warning which would be comparable to that offered by Thucydides, when he noted that not all parts of his history were written in the same way.<sup>34</sup> If Matthew and Luke intended the rest of their Gospels to be read as (in some sense) accounts of what actually happened, they certainly offered the reader no hint that they intended the infancy narratives to be read differently.<sup>35</sup>

At one point, Brown appears to anticipate this objection. In a passage I have already cited, he writes that

any intelligent attempt to combine an acceptance of inspiration with an acceptance of biblical criticism must lead to the recognition that there are in the Bible fiction, parable, and folklore, as well as history. Nor will it do to argue that the infancy narratives must be historical

32. Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 17.

33. See also Luz's comment ("Fiktivität und Traditionstreue im Matthäusevangelium", 154) on those passages in the Gospel which he believes Matthew to have invented: "In keinem einzigen Fall deutet irgend ein Textmerkmal eines von Matthäus fingierten Textes an, daß diese oder jene Episode keine Referenz in der Geschichte Jesus haben will."

34. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* I, 22 (rev. ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 47-48; Greek text in M. C. Marchant (ed.), *Thucydides: Book I, chs. 1-55* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1978) 19.

35. As Strauss notes (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 95) some early nineteenth-century scholars recognised this difficulty and – fearing lest the rest of the gospel be read in the same way as the infancy narrative – posited that Luke 1-2 was "a subsequent and inauthentic addition".

or else they would not have been joined to the main body of Gospel material which had its basis in history. That argument wrongly supposes that history or biography was the dominant optic of the evangelist, and also that the evangelist could tell whether the stories he included had a historical origin (p. 34).

But as we have seen, these observations do not count against my argument. For they allow for a secondary interest in history on the part of the evangelists. History may not have been their “dominant optic”, but that does not mean they were unconcerned with matters of historical fact. And once again, Brown’s comments suffer from his repeated failure to distinguish between intended and actual historicity. That an infancy narrative is joined seamlessly to the rest of a work clearly intended to be taken as historical does not imply that it is historical in fact. But it is at least *prima facie* evidence that it is historical in intent.

#### MERE ALLEGORY OR INTENDED HISTORY?

Were the evangelists writing accounts that resemble elaborate allegories, or were they writing accounts of what they intended their readers to understand were actual events, albeit events charged with theological significance? If Brown’s exegesis is correct, then I propose that we have an answer to this question. The evangelists’ concern with historicity may have been a secondary concern, but they do seem to have taken for granted the historical reality of the events they narrate. More seriously, their theological message is built upon this assumption of historical factuality. The interpreter who wishes to respect the evangelists’ intentions may not simply set aside, as theologically irrelevant, the question of the historicity of these stories.

This weakness of Brown’s hermeneutical – as opposed to exegetical – claims seems so evident that I am driven to speculate about the source of his error. When faced with a story such as that of the magi (Matt 2:1-12), could it be that Brown reasoned as follows?

- (1) Critical scrutiny shows that this story does not in fact refer to actual events and was intended to transmit a religious message.
- (2) The intended religious message is true.
- (3) *Therefore* it was not intended to refer to actual events.

This fallacious reasoning would display the confusion of *intended* and *actual* historicity I have remarked on above. It would overlook the possibility that the evangelists may have intended a historicity that we can no longer affirm and that their religious message may rest on this basis. But it would explain a puzzling feature of Brown’s work: the fact

that he affirms historical intent (and recognises its theological significance) only when faced with a story (the virginal conception) whose historical basis he himself accepts.

As modern readers, we may find it difficult to imagine how Matthew and Luke could have expected their audience to regard these stories as reports of actual events. But this merely represents a failure of historical imagination on our part. If we set aside the suggestion that the evangelists were acting in bad faith (perpetrating a deliberate and – it must be said – very successful act of fraud), we can only assume that their criteria for judging a story about Jesus to be historical were very different from ours. In other words, we should not conclude that the evangelists had no concern for history, merely that they had very different standards by which they made their judgements of historical plausibility. Here the great nineteenth-century pioneer, David Friedrich Strauss, may have been right. How might the evangelists and their communities have reasoned? By a very simple process, Strauss argues. They would have thought, “Such and such things must have happened to the Messiah; Jesus was the Messiah; therefore such and such things happened to him.”<sup>36</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

At what conclusion have I arrived? On the basis of Raymond Brown’s exegesis, the accuracy of which I assume, I have argued that there is something incoherent about his hermeneutics. I have argued that time and again Brown treats the infancy narratives as something resembling elaborate allegories, in which theological significance is separable from historical accuracy. But if his exegesis is correct, then to treat the infancy narratives in this way is to do violence to the evangelists’ intentions. More seriously, it is to undermine the very foundation on which they constructed their religious message. There is, of course, a further question to be asked. The evangelists may have taken for granted the historical reference of their stories and understood their theological significance to be founded on this. But could we as modern readers detach the latter from the former? Whatever the evangelists may have thought, we can still ask, “Were they right? Does the loss of historical reference necessarily imply a loss of religious significance?” This, of course, is a theological and philosophical question. On the one occasion he addresses it, Brown offers an affirmative answer. If the virginal conception did not occur, then the theological message is without foundation (p. 530). But this conclusion undermines the edifying intent

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36. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 84.

of Brown's commentary as a whole. So if Brown is right, then redaction criticism offers the Christian no way out of his difficulties. The historicity of these stories does still matter.