The Theological Implications of Declaring
the Resurrection to be Historical

by

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the resurrection of Jesus can be considered as a historical
event and that there are important theological implications of declaring the resurrection of
Jesus to be a historical event.

The first part of this thesis identifies the questions that motivate this investigation,
and providing examples of confusion of conceptuality and terminology often involved in
posing these questions.

The second part offers a brief synopsis of the evolution of historical method in the
West, and surveys recent developments within historiography in order to establish that
there is meaning and value in pursuing the question of historicity in regards to events,
even if absolute certainty is never within the historian’s grasp.
The third part considers the relationship of historical method to events that may be considered without analogy to everyday experience, specifically miracles, as discussed among twenty-first century theologians, in order to establish that consideration of events with religious significance may still be undertaken within the limits of disciplined historical method.

The fourth part critically examines the use of historical method by selected New Testament scholars as it pertains to the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, and explores the nature of the Gospel writers’ historiography, in order to show the various relationships between the implicit or explicit historical methodologies employed by New Testament scholars and their results regarding the historicity of the resurrection.

The fifth part surveys recent theological assessments of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, attempting to lay bare what each author is trying to preserve or avoid from a systematic perspective, in order to establish how it is that the question of historicity is and is not applicable to the resurrection of Jesus.

The sixth part discusses in a constructive way several key implications of declaring the resurrection to be historical for contemporary theology, including of the relationship of salvation and the historical process, the freedom of God to act within history for the liberation of the oppressed, our vision of the eschatological consummation, the telos of God’s creation.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Interest in “the historical Jesus” remains as fervent as ever. Both inside and outside the academy, questions such as, “Did Jesus really say that?” and “What was Jesus really about?” are alive and well. Such questions hinge, in large part, on the more basic question of what we mean by “really”—or, more precisely, what we mean by “historical.” This thesis will explore that latter question, and relate it to what is arguably the most theologically significant test-case of historicity, the resurrection of Jesus, ultimately drawing out the implications for theology of deciding what we mean by declaring Jesus’ resurrection to be historical.

Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Theological Method

For the purposes of this discussion I will employ a basic method of critical realism. This method takes as a given a multiplicity of perceiving subjects and objects of perception, allowing for the ontological independence of existing objects from perceiving subjects. This method encourages the self-identification of the perceiving subject, such that the subject’s perspective can be factored into inferences from observations. This method does not, however, allow the independence of the object to be obliterated by the acknowledgement of perspective; rather, it works on the understanding that while capacities for perception differ, there remains a degree of utility in perceiving subjects communicating their self-aware, conditioned perceptions to their mutual enrichment. To
put it plainly, the reader and I (and many others) may intelligibly discuss the world we
live in.

A critical realist approach to history must also work, therefore, with an
acknowledgement that there is also an ontological independence of the past of the world
we live in from those in the present who may or may not comprehend the past’s
significance. That is, while the past is only indirectly perceptible through present mental
and verbal reconstruction, its causal efficacy is not completely determined by our
perception. To put it plainly, there are certain things which are true about the world both
logically and temporally prior to my comprehension of them. This is the larger tradition
of Western metaphysics, reaching from Aristotle through Aquinas to more recent
interpretations as diverse as those of Lonergan and Heidegger\(^1\). I will not argue for an
epistemology of naive realism, however, but I will prefer the kind of critical realism that
understands that truth is to be found in the interaction of objective reality and our
adjustable categories of comprehension as the only possible foundation for doing history.

Also, for the purposes of this discussion I will assume that the resurrection of
Jesus is of central symbolic value to the Christian faith from its earliest manifestations.
The announcement of the resurrection is the climax of all four canonical Gospels
(Matthew 28:5; Mark 16:6; Luke 25:5; John 20:18), and Jesus’ own predictions of the
resurrection are a recurring motif within each Gospel (Matthew 12:40, 16:21, 17:22,

(Allen, TX : Christian Classics, 1981); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford : Blackwell, 1962);
Bernard Lonergan *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research
Institute of Regis College, 1990).
19:17, 26:32; Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:34, 14:28; Luke 9:22, 18:33; John 10:17, 14:19, 16:16). The apostolic proclamation identified in the Acts of the Apostles is the vindication of Jesus’ ministry by means of God raising Jesus to new life (Acts 2:32-36, 10:34-43, 17:16-31). The dependence of the believers’ new life “in Christ” on the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus is a central theme in most of Paul’s letters (2 Corinthians 4:13-17; Ephesians 1:3-14; Philippians 2:5-13; Colossians 3:1-4; 2 Timothy 2:8-13). Even the Apocalypse repeatedly identifies “the Lamb who was slain” with “the Living One,” the one “who was, and is, and is to come” (Revelation 4:1-11). Throughout the New Testament, the death of Jesus is portrayed as an ordinarily shameful end to Jesus’ life—except for the extraordinary raising of Jesus to new life. For the early Christians from whom the present-day Church is descended, the resurrection of Jesus was taken to be God’s seal of approval on Jesus’ proclamation of God’s reign, and God’s own proclamation concerning human destiny (Romans 1:1-6; Acts 4:1-12; 1 Peter 1:3-9).

There is certainly little doubt that the post-canonical Christian tradition understood, against a Docetic view, the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It is clear that by the beginning of the second century, apostolic fathers such as Ignatius declared belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus as a sine qua non of Christian faith, in opposition to Gnostic teachings threatening the doctrinal unity of the Church.³ Later in the second century, it is apparent that the Church understood the term “resurrection” as necessarily bodily: Tertullian argued that since we are told by the apostles that Jesus experienced

resurrection, it must have been bodily; therefore, he goes on to say, our eschatological resurrection will be similarly bodily, although it will be animated not by natural principles but by “spiritual” principles, through the agency of the Holy Spirit.⁴

In the early third century, Origen defended the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb. Origen argued that Christianity is a faith founded on the acts of God in history, every bit as much as Judaism. For Origen, the New Testament reports of Jesus’ bodily resurrection are authoritative although, because they are historical accounts, they can be examined and critiqued. Because they all report, in their various ways, the same event, Origen tends to regard them as comprising a single historical record, standing or falling together. Origen is, however, sensitive to the need for integrity in dealing with documentary sources, and that this is nowhere more important than in consideration of the New Testament account of the resurrection. Origen understands that his interlocutor’s characterization of the women as half-mad would eliminate their credibility as witnesses, but counters that this characterization is grounded in their testifying to something that his interlocutor finds incredible. Origen, confident in the historical value of the Gospel accounts, does struggle, however, with questions regarding the nature of what they report, and feels compelled to qualify his claim to Jesus’ bodily resurrection in order to maintain its historicity:

And truly, after His resurrection, he existed in a body intermediate, as it were, between the grossness of that which He had before His sufferings, and the appearance of a soul uncovered by such a body.... And although Celsus may wish to place what is told of Jesus, and of those who saw Him after His resurrection, on

the same level with imaginary appearances of a different kind, and those who invented such, yet to those who institute a candid and intelligent examination, the events will appear only the more miraculous.\(^5\)

In the fourth century, living in the newly-privileged post-Constantine Church, Athanasius engaged in a very different kind of historical reasoning, assuming both the sovereignty of God and therefore the morality of the historical process. His understanding of what constituted historical evidence for the resurrection included the miracles wrought by the apostles in Jesus’ name, the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem, the diminishing of pagan religions, the fulfillment of prophecies from the Hebrew scriptures, the past courage of martyrs and the present chastity of virgins, the consonance of the resurrection with Greek metaphysical categories, and the widespread acceptance of Christian faith:

“Or who else has given men such assurance of immortality, as has the cross of Christ, and the Resurrection of His Body? For although the Greeks have told all manner of false tales, yet they were not able to feign a Resurrection of their idols—for it never crossed their mind, whether it be at all possible for the body again to exist after death.”\(^6\)

In *City of God*, Augustine laboured long over the conceptuality of resurrection, dealing with questions such as the possibility of the reconstitution of the parts of a disintegrated human body involved in our future resurrection. The assumption seems to be that if intellectual objections to the bodily nature of resurrection can be met, people will happily embrace the historical resurrection of Jesus: “But if they do not believe that


these miracles were wrought by Christ’s apostles to gain credence to their preaching of His resurrection and ascension, this one grand miracle suffices for us, that the whole world has believed without any miracles."

Athanasius and Augustine inferred the historical dimension of the resurrection from its historic dimension, something disallowed by modern historical method, but it is still the bodily nature of the resurrection in view.

In the thirteenth century, after various conflicts and involvement in the Crusades had brought Christians into large-scale engagement with the Muslim world, the relativity of the historical claims for the Christian faith, and the resurrection in particular, came into view and may have prompted some of the detailed reflections of Thomas Aquinas. Thomas approached the question that had been the subject of speculation a thousand years before him: what is the nature of the event testified to in the Gospels? Thomas is clear that Jesus rose in a state of glory which, in scholastic tradition, meant that his bodily properties included impassibility, subtlety, agility, and clarity. These properties were developed from theological considerations but also abstracted from the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. There is something new developing here: whereas in most previous analyses the physicality of the resurrection is invoked as material to deliberation on its historicity, here the historicity of the resurrection is invoked as material to deliberation on its physicality. Thomas’s reference to the historical \textit{eventfulness} of the resurrection, that is, his rising \textit{in order to} appear to his disciples, is in turn subject to

considerations of the physicality of the resurrection. For Thomas, there is full complementarity of the physicality of the resurrection and the historicity of the resurrection, each helping to explain the other. However, Thomas says, “The individual arguments taken alone are not sufficient proof of Christ’s resurrection but taken together, in a cumulative way, they manifest it perfectly.”

The Reformers, for all their distaste for the scholastics, share with Thomas a high regard for Augustine’s certainty as to the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Calvin says, “But it is to be observed, in passing, that when is said to have ‘risen from the dead,’ these terms express the reality both of his death and resurrection, as if it had been said, that he died the same death as other men naturally die, and received immortality in the same mortal flesh which he had assumed.”

It is certainly true that the majority of Christians through the centuries have believed that the resurrection of Jesus involved the transformation of his physical body, and it is almost as safe to say that the majority of New Testament scholars today, whatever their personal beliefs, will agree that the New Testament depicts some kind of bodily resurrection of Jesus. Thomas F. Torrance sums up the larger historical Christian tradition on the proclamation of the bodily nature of the resurrection when he says that

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“everything depends on the resurrection of the body, otherwise all we have is a Ghost for a Saviour.”\textsuperscript{10}

And finally, for the purposes of this discussion I will assume that seeking the “truth” concerning the resurrection of Jesus—as for any other, non-axiomatic matter—is neither purely a matter of empirical research nor purely a matter of self-evident intra-systematic truth. One cannot write a complete history, or engage in serious historical reflection, regarding a religiously significant event without intra-systematic considerations, namely, without naming one’s metaphysical and theological parameters. It makes a great deal of difference, when dealing with the relative historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, whether the historian believes him or herself to live in a world where human persons cannot rise from the dead, or can but in fact do not rise from the dead, or can but do not typically rise from the dead, or cannot rise from the dead without supernatural assistance, or in fact rise from the dead on their own now and then. What the historian deems possible is certain to influence their sorting and weighting of the evidence as to what may or may not have occurred.

Moreover, one cannot write a complete theology, or engage in serious theological reflection, regarding a religiously significant event without first considering the empirical evidence that purports to describe the event under consideration. It makes a great deal of difference, when dealing with the theological significance of the resurrection of Jesus, whether the theologian believes that the resurrection was an intra-psychic event of one

apostle, or an intra-psychic event common to more than one apostle, or an extra-psychic event dependent on correlative intra-psychic effects, or an extra-psychic event independent of correlative intra-psychic effects, or an inter-psychic event with no definable intra-psychic or extra-psychic correlative. What the theologian deems to have happened is certain to influence the exposition of the significance of the event.

I will take up James F. Keating’s suggestion of employing Susan Haack’s idea of *foundherentism* as a way to build a bridge across Lessing’s infamous “broad, ugly ditch” between historical truths built upon contingencies and metaphysical truths based on axiomatic certainties.\(^\text{11}\) Simply put, Haack sees truth as requiring reference to empirically established facts checked by the need for coherence with other established facts. As in solving a crossword puzzle, the clues suggest certain responses, but the selection among possible responses requires the weaving together of responses suggested by multiple sets of clues. Once this interdependence is granted, both the historian and the theologian are free—and perhaps even obligated—to approach religiously significant events such as the resurrection with an approach that integrates the disciplines of history and theology in a way that is respectful of the methodologies of both. In using an integrated approach, one may avoid a purely historical *foundationalism* on the one hand, which presumes to know *a priori* what phenomena may be included or excluded from being valued as “facts,” and a purely theological *coherentism* on the other hand, which presumes to know what the

completed picture must look like before any reconstructive attempts at historical inquiry are made. The former makes theology subject to history, while the latter makes history subject to theology. Either strategy effectively denies their interdependence. An integrated approach, such as Haack’s *foundherentism*, is needed to do any kind of history, but especially history involving purported events that are construed as having religious significance.

In the course of this work, I will further develop my argument that establishment of observed historical “facts” are established within chosen parameters of the metaphysically possible, and that chosen parameters of the metaphysically possible are in fact derived from historical observations. By way of example, we posit a “law” of gravity following countless observations of larger objects (such as the earth) attracting smaller objects (such as an unsupported stone); we therefore permit historical accounts of objects behaving in ways subject to that posited law (e.g., a falling stone), and dismiss historical accounts of objects behaving in ways that seem to violate that posited law (e.g., a floating, unsupported stone). When doing theology rather than physics, we may posit certain “laws” regarding divine activity, such as “God always does what is just/loving/right,” which become the metaphysical parameters within which we consider accounts of purported historical events. In the case of the resurrection of Jesus, the purported event may be construed as violating the “law” that human beings who die do not live again in a way observable to us, and therefore cause us to dismiss the historical claim made by the early Christians, or the purported event may be construed as a historical fact that alters our previous conception of reality, such that we might say that
human beings who die do not *ordinarily* live again in a way observable to us, or, more consonant with the theological argument of this thesis, that human beings who die do not live again in a way observable to us—yet. At some point, the physicist, the metaphysicist, the theologian, and the historian all have to decide what kind of world they are living in, and what kind of events are theoretically possible, in order to wrestle with new or unusual claims.

**Initial Working Definitions**

Writing about historiography in English is complicated by the use of the single term “history” to indicate different dimensions of reality. While refinement of these terms will be required as my argument develops, I begin by identifying initial definitions for certain terms.

By “the past” I refer to those events which, while contingent, have occurred prior to the present in the course of time. The past includes mental, verbal, and physical events that have taken place among, affecting and being affected by, other such events. The causes and effects of past events are, in principle, observable from within the causal matrix of the known universe, whether or not they have in fact been observed. As with present events, past events may be “observed” by inference from their causes and effects, though always without absolute certainty: while some inferences will make more sense than others within given conceptual parameters, we can never be certain in more than a provisional way that we have correctly linked causes and effects.
By “history” I refer to the remembering of those past events which are in some way found significant for the appreciation of the present. This implies a selection process which may be more or less instinctual and more or less conscious. The significance of past events such that they are deemed worthy of remembering by historians can be referred to as their “historicity.” Within history there are two dimensions of consideration of the significance of past events that are always present, that are somewhat loosely identified by two related English words. In this writing, “historical” refers to the claim of factuality for past events; events are historical insofar as they are deemed to actually have occurred. Meanwhile, in this writing, “historic” refers to the claim of enduring significance of past events; events are historic insofar as are deemed to significant beyond their immediate temporal context.  

History attempts to identify and expound on the significance of events that are both historical and historic. History goes awry when it identifies and expounds on the significance of events which did not actually occur. This would be the case if we attempted to identify and expound on the significance of Julius Caesar discovering America. Even if this were a propagated legend that had great impact, historical method that respects temporal sequence as ordinarily understood would not cite Caesar’s discovery of America but rather the creation of the legend as a historical event. History also goes awry when it inappropriately identifies and expounds on the significance of

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In this I am indebted, as many others are, to the work of Carl E. Braaten, translator of Martin Kahler’s *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Fortress Press, 1964 [original published in 1897]), for his efforts to translate the German words *historisch* as “historical” and *geschichtliche* as “historic.”
events which did occur. This would be the case if we attempted to identify and expound on the significance of Julius Caesar’s defeat of Marc Anthony on Inuit art prior to direct or indirect exposure of the Inuit to non-Inuit cultures. Even if Caesar did in fact defeat Anthony, and this occurred prior to the creation of the art in question, properly-constituted history would not cite the historic significance of Caesar’s victory without the reasonable inference of a causal link between the past event and the current phenomenon.

These examples imply the existence of “historical method”: agreed-upon practices that comprise the discipline of “doing” history. They also imply the existence of the historian, the one responsible for doing history, who will bring his or her existing knowledge, conceptual framework, and active tendencies to the work. They also imply the construction of a hypothetical narrative—an account of what the historian reasons to have actually occurred, and its present significance—often in written form, that attempts to advance human knowledge by doing history. The product of a historian engaging historical method and producing a hypothetical narrative, if it is in written form, is properly called “historiography,” literally, the writing of history, though it is often simply referred to as the author’s “history,” the historian’s narrative reconstruction of history.

13 We could properly refer to “creating history,” but this has the unfortunate connotation of inventing fictitious stories to pass off as historical; we could also properly refer to “making history,” but this has the popular connotation of engaging the historical process by attempting to do something which will be considered historic. Therefore we fall back on the awkward, but increasingly recognized, phrase, “doing history” to indicate engagement with history using some form of historical method.

14 This understanding of history is widespread, but for our purposes it is enough to note that it is made explicit in modern historians, as in R. G. Collingwood, The Idea of History (Toronto: Oxford, 1935), postmodern historians, as in Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse in Historical Representation (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1987), and post-postmodern historians (see Chapter Two, under “Postmodern Historiography”), as in N. T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).
The term “historiography” has also taken on the broader meaning of the entire process of doing history, including the historian’s sources of information, the historian’s engagement of historical method, the product of the historian’s labours, and even the historic reception of the historiography produced. The very attempt to analyse and compare various historiographies, if it is done in reference to the historians’ historical setting and in consideration of their historic impact, is itself a form of “doing history,” a historiography of historiographies.

What This Present Writing Undertakes

This present writing presents a cumulative, multi-stage argument. It argues for each successive conclusion on its own, and the reader may judge each successive conclusion as a stronger or weaker support of the overall argument.

In Chapter Two I will provide a brief synopsis of the evolution of historical method in Western civilization, relying on the historiographical work of Ernst Breisach, Arnoldo Momigliano, Elizabeth Clark, Samuel Bryskorg, R.A. Burridge, Jan Vansina, and Birger Gerhardsson. These authors argue that while there are differences between the working assumptions and methods of ancient and medieval historians on the one hand

and modern historians on the other, the former were not without concern for the historicity of their accounts, and their work may, with care, be used as historical data for the latter. I will then proceed to survey more recent developments within historiography as it has developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, beginning with modern historiographers Leopold von Ranke, Gustav Droysen, and Max Weber in Germany, March Bloch in France, R. G. Collingwood, Edward Hallett Carr, and Karl Popper in Britain, and G. R. Elton in the United States. I will also then look at postmodern historiographies developed by Hayden White, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault, responses to their work, and identify what I believe to be their enduring contributions to historiography. Finally, I will argue for the emergence of a post-postmodern historiography, as envisioned by C. T. McIntire and theologically developed for use in

16 Breisach, Historiography, on von Ranke, 232-234, and on Weber, 283; see also Hayden White’s synopsis of Droysen’s Historik in Hayden White, The Content of the Form, Narrative Discourse in Historical Representation (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1987), 92-93.


New Testament scholarship by Udo Schnelle.\(^{21}\) I will maintain that the discipline of historical inquiry survives the challenge of relativism often thought ingredient to postmodernism. I will also argue that the religious significance of historical events may be considered to be within the historian’s purview.

In Chapter Three I will consider the relationship of historical method to events that may be considered without analogy to everyday experience. I will first trace the ongoing conversation among those authors whose work directly discusses the distinction between scientific and dogmatic history made by Ernst Troeltsch,\(^{22}\) including Martin Kahler, Rudolf Bultmann, and Karl Barth,\(^{23}\) arguing that Barth effectively counters Bultmann’s systematic refusal to entertain the possibility of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. I will also consider the contributions of Hans Conzelmann, Joachim Jeremias, Heinrich Ott, and Ernst Käsemann,\(^{24}\) and review the analyses of this extended


\(^{22}\) Ernst Troeltsch, *Religion in History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991 [originally published in 1898]).


conversation by Van Austin Harvey and Terrence W. Tilley, concluding that there are no methodological grounds for excluding the resurrection of Jesus from historical consideration. I will then discuss the relationship of Christian faith and history in the thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, to clarify some of the issues in the intersection of history and theology. I will then turn directly to the subject of historical reasoning and the resurrection of Jesus by referring to arguments for and against its historicity by Michael Martin, Sarah Coakley, Richard Swinburne, Robert Greg Cavin, John Polkinghorne, Richard R. Niebuhr, William Lane


Craig, Geza Vermes, and Daniel P. Fuller, concluding we may undertake consideration of events with religious significance within the limits of disciplined, self-conscious historical method, and that the New Testament does in fact offer us data fit for such historical inquiry.


28 Ernst Käsemann, Essays (op. cit).
and Pinchas Lapide;\textsuperscript{29} those critiquing religious faith with historical research, including John Dominic Crossan, Gerd Lüdemann, Willi Marxsen, and Amy-Jill Levine;\textsuperscript{30} and those seeking to integrate religious faith with history, including N. T. Wright, John P. Meier, Marcus Borg, and Udo Schnelle.\textsuperscript{31} I will comment on their work, discussing such factors as confidence in source criticism, confidence in historical criticism, and confidence in the correlation of historical and theological claims. In doing so, I will highlight the various relationships between the implicit and explicit historical methodologies employed and their results regarding the historicity of the resurrection.

In Chapter Five I will survey recent theological assessments of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. I will begin by discussing an article by Alvin G. Padgett in which he coins the term “transhistorical” to identify a sense of the historical that embraces the inevitability of perspective.\textsuperscript{32} I will then examine constructive proposals

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regarding the classification of the resurrection of Jesus by Peter Carnley and Gerald O’Collins, proposals which, I will argue, have disabling flaws. I will then examine the utility of employing the category of testimony in the very different proposals of Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza and Pieter Craffert, which opens new horizons for the theologically-sensitive historian, and I will then explore the utility of employing the narrative categories defined by Hans Frei, which go still further in dealing with the issue of historicity in the case of the unique action of God. Finally, I will note the dominant understanding of Jesus’ resurrection in the Christian tradition, and outline N.T. Wright’s proposal to uphold this understanding. In each case, I will attempt to lay bare what each author is trying to preserve or avoid from a systematic perspective. I will do this in order to establish how it is that the question of historicity is and is not applicable to the resurrection of Jesus. I will then draw some interim conclusions, namely that it should be permissible within academic discourse to employ a post-postmodern historiography, to request employment of a historical method adequate to the subject matter of the resurrection of Jesus, to engage in historical inquiry through the texts of the New Testament, to conclude that the New Testament consistently refers to the historical event of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and to maintain that any inference of divine causality


with regards to the resurrection of Jesus should require correlation with other inference of divine causality.

In Chapter Six I will argue that declaring the resurrection of Jesus to be historical has at least three key implications for contemporary Christian theology as it pertains to history, eschatology, and soteriology. I will begin by favourably reviewing Robert W. Jenson’s suggestion that only an eschatological hermeneutic is adequate to the interpretation of Jesus’ resurrection, and appreciatively considering the insight regarding the resurrection of Jesus as a historical particularity discussed by Anthony Godzieba, Lieven Boeve, and Michele Saracino. I will then explore the implications of my interim conclusions for the relationship of God and time, using Eitel’s commentary on Barth in this matter and insights from Balthasar; for the relationship of God and novelty, using John F. Haught’s work on process theology, readings of selected Black and liberation theologians, and insights from Richard Bauckham’s interpretation of Moltmann; and for the relationship of God and destiny, using readings from selected


feminist theologians and the work of Pannenberg.\textsuperscript{40} There are doubtless other implications than those I will describe, but these will suffice to establish the importance of, and to clarify what is at stake for Christian faith in, the question of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORY OF HISTORY

Assumptions about what constitutes historicity and the role of the historian as interpreter of fact and creator of narrative has changed throughout the course of Western history. While ancient and medieval historiography, prior to the development of the modern scientific paradigm, operated on different assumptions and proceeded with different methodological emphases, modern historiography is not entirely discontinuous with its forebears. There has been intense debate in from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century regarding historigraphical method, and the truth-value of historical assertions, that has produced in the early twenty-first century a widespread compromise among historians that more or less harmonize with a critical-realistic epistemology. This “post-postmodern” historiography as we now know it in the Western world is a reasonably recent and contingent development that appears fruitful for consideration of the relationship of Christian theology to historical assertions.

Traditional Historiography

Historiographer Ernst Breisach defined traditional historiography as that which “established for all events their continuity with the sacred past by authorizing what constitutes proper memory, by interpreting the why and how of events, and by using a methodology that stresses the consensus of continuing texts rather than verification
measured according to human reason.”1 Ancient Indian traditional historiography, he points out, featured “a lack of interest in precise dating; a lack of desire to distinguish clearly between legend, fantasy, and fact; a love of poetry; a preference for the idealized over the realistic; and the absence of a method for establishing the congruence of text and preceding text or of text and observable world.”2 Ancient Chinese traditional historiography, by contrast, was “given to the concrete and the particular rather than the supernatural and abstract,” in which “Heaven provided for the authority of the ruling dynasty but also for revolution and the subsequent establishment of a new dynasty.” After Confucius, the heavenly mandate was linked to relative conformance to the moral code, “always mindful of linking authority to ancient times and of offering proper lessons from the past.”3

In reference to the Western tradition, Breisach says that “Greek and Roman historiographies were in their entirety traditional, as they were never decisively shaped by the rationalism and scepticism of their own cultures.” Historiography and its literary sister biography were focussed on events and individuals to be held up for public scrutiny and “judged according to moral precepts and public benefits.”4 In characterizing Greco-Roman historiography, Patristics scholar Elizabeth Clark writes that


2 Ibid., 4025.

3 Ibid., 4026.

4 Ibid., 4026-4027.
Ancient historians, unlike our contemporaries, wrote for nonprofessional audiences for whom epic poetry was the only narrative genre; thus they were immune both to Rankean concerns and to modern demands for ‘professionalism’. . . A central issue distinguishing ancient from modern historiography concerns the assessment of truth claims. Whereas modern historians point to accuracy in the use of sources as their hallmark, ancient historians concentrate rather on the absence (or presence) of favouritism stemming from political views or social relations that would affect the writer’s view of living persons. . .

Breisach agrees that freedom from self-interested biases was valued in ancient historiography, but also emphasizes how Thucydides and his successors in ancient Greece took pride in developing the discipline of history by applying critical thinking to the matter of accessibility of their sources, turning from an emphasis on refinement of mythology to an emphasis on the writing of more recent history that could be substantiated by eyewitness accounts. Breisach cites Cicero’s approach as typical of ancient Rome: “Cicero, calling for histories that encouraged virtue, nevertheless called for truth: ‘Who does not know history’s first law to be that an author must not dare tell anything but the truth? And the second law that he must make bold to tell the whole truth?’”

Historiographer Arnoldo Momigliano argues that Greek historiography represents an advancement from being merely cyclical-mythical to being marked by a concern with accurately depicting historical referents within its methodology: “The choice between what is true and what is untrue, or at least between what is probable and

5 Elizabeth Clark, History, Theory, Text: Historian and the Linguistic Turn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 166. By “Rankean concerns” Clark is alluding to the determination of the correspondence of assertions to actual occurrences in terms of place, number, sequence, etc.

what is improbable, was inherent in the profession of the historian as the Greeks understood it.”

It is worthwhile noting that Momigliano, for his part, delivered his lectures on ancient historiography in 1962, before the full force of the postmodernist critique of historiography was felt, though the later editing and publication of his lecture notes show no sign of retreating from his presumption of historical reference for ancient historiography in the absence of evidence to the contrary. Breisach’s emphasis on ancient historiography’s attention to method and source-criticism, however, may be paired with his profound distaste for postmodern historiography as represented by Derrida and Foucault:

All of that dispensed with the connection of the text with reality (now the inaccessible “referent”) seen as the source of illicit authority claims; substituted the endless creation of meanings for the accumulation of knowledge; rejected all truth-claims as hinging on the now rejected permanent features of the human condition; denied the existence and efficacious role of the rational and purposeful individual; and dispensed with authoritative metahistorical schemes. . . that spoke of history as a meaningful totality.

While Momigliano may be professionally motivated in his writing to assert the meaningfulness of his research—and hence its positive relation to modern historical method—Breisach’s concern seems to be for the relative independence of the historian in establishing data available for the construction of such schemes. Such motivations, if present, do not rule their opinions out of bounds: it is difficult to conceive of any


8 Breisach, Historiography, 337.
thoroughgoing research that does not presume the meaningfulness of its data or the integrity of the researcher—a caveat which, it would seem, should also apply to criticism of religiously-motivated researchers.

New Testament scholar Samuel Byrskog finds in ancient historiography evidence of concern for historical accuracy in a fashion analogous to modern historical method in the practice of “autopsy”—the careful delineation of sources—and the preference for eyewitnesses: “the major Greek and Roman historians who comment on their own or others’ practice of inquiry and sources adhered to Heraclitus’ old dictum. Eyes were surer witnesses than ears.... Autopsy was the essential means to reach back into the past.”

Byrskog further argues that frequent reference to eyewitness testimony shows that the early Christians were also concerned with historical truth within ancient Western historiographical parameters. The canonical Christian scriptures bear frequent reference to eyewitness testimony: Paul challenged the Corinthians to verify his account of Jesus’ resurrection with those to whom Jesus had appeared (1 Cor. 15:1-8); Luke portrays the election of Matthias to the circle of the twelve as depending on his having been present to Jesus’ ministry from his baptism in the Jordan (Acts 1:15-26); Peter differentiates his privilege of having “seen” or “known” Jesus from those who have believed because of apostolic testimony (1 Pet. 1:8; 5:1); and even the later writings of John invoke first-hand testimony (Jn. 21:24; 1 Jn. 1:1). Later claims concerning the apostolic origins of the Gospels present a similar desire to ground the Church’s historical claims in ways similar

to modern-day evidentiary procedures. Regardless of the actual veracity of any or all of these claims, Byrskorg argues that it is plain that first-century Christians were aware of the value placed on historical accuracy in their milieu:

Eyewitnesses who could also serve as informants during the emergence and development of the gospel tradition truly existed in early Christianity. There were, to be sure, eyewitnesses who never became informants, but by the same token, we find the local people, Peter as the most prominent representative of the group of disciples, the women with Mary Magdalenе, and the family of Jesus with James and Mary, Jesus’ mother, all presented partly as eyewitnesses and informants.¹⁰

Bresiach contends that the dual literary genres of historiography and biography held a certain complementarity, with the former narrating lives in the context of events, and the latter analyzing personalities in light of the events they caused to happen, but that both historiography and biography were concerned with the truthfulness of their reports. Richard A. Burridge employs quantitative analysis in comparing the contents of the Gospels with a variety of Graeco-Roman biographies and finds that in both “a number of standard, typical biographical topics or motifs recur,” including ancestry, birth, boyhood and education, great deeds, virtues, and death and consequences. Burridge concludes that the Gospels are indeed well-situated within the genre of βίοι. Not only, he maintains, does this bring the Gospels within the orbit of historical investigation, but in itself it says something about the relationship of the historical figure of Jesus to the formation of the

¹⁰ Byrskorg, Story, 91 (emphasis original).
Christian message: “It is our contention that this βίος nature of the gospel genre should also restore the centrality of the person of Jesus.”¹¹

Jan Vansina proposes that we take a wider view of historical recollection in order to put the composition of the Gospels into context as historical sources. In an introduction to the subject of oral history, Vansina observes that oral tradition is likely to be more accurate, not less, when it flows through multiple channels of communication, because these channels critique and correct one another. By way of illustrating this principle, he contextualizes the creation of the Gospels within a process of oral tradition: “No one will consider the three synoptic Gospels as independent sources, even though they have different authors. The resemblances between them are too great, both overall and in detail, to conclude anything else but that they stemmed from one single oral milieu, from one corpus in one community…. This situation is the norm with oral traditions.”¹²

Birger Gerhardsson similarly emphasizes the prevalence of structured systems of oral history in the ancient world: “Without minimizing the role played by the people as preservers of tradition, we must, however, be quite clear as to the special role—the fundamental role—played here by certain specialists who, more or less professionally, carry on the traditions vital to the religious group.”¹³ These practitioners could be found in schools of philosophy, law, and in rabbinical training, where “the value of such


¹³ Birger Gerhardsson, Memory and Manuscript (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1961), 71.
sayings—for the Rabbis—is entirely dependent on their historicity.” The importance of being able to trace provenance of sayings to past masters was well-known. In the case of the Gospel writers, then, there is no contradiction between being a faithful recipient of the tradition and having concern for fidelity to historical events as first reported; in fact, most often, they were one and the same:

It seems to be an extremely tenaciously-held misapprehension among exegetes that an early Christian author must either be a purposeful theologian and writer or a fairly reliable historian.... This is a false alternative.... The fact of the early Christian Apostles, teachers and Evangelists having presented their material with a religious end in view does not necessarily mean per se that their memories ceased to function, or that their respect for historical facts vanished.  

If the unity and consistency of the oral tradition behind the Gospels are entered as reasonable suppositions, it would seem natural to assume, without countervailing evidence, that the Gospels contain historical remembrances of Jesus. The sheer invention of non-historical biographical information about Jesus in support of an earlier agreed-upon kerygma would stand as an exception to ancient historiography as we know it in the Jewish, Greek, and Roman traditions, and therefore those claiming that the Gospel accounts contain such inventions would bear the burden of proof.

Medieval and Early Modern Historiography

With the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Church sought to secure its own newly-independent identity through framing its own history. Moving into the third

14 Ibid., 183.
15 Ibid., 203.
century CE, the prospect of the imminent end of the world receded, and as Christianity became tolerated and even promoted within the Roman Empire, Church leaders sought to fuse Roman history with the sacred history of the Jewish people. In the relative weakness of political forces around it, the Church was relatively free to integrate its adopted past with its peculiar worldview. In largest part, Christians self-consciously adopted the historiography of ancient Jewish historians who, according to Momigliano, tended to revere their sources more than Greco-Roman historians, but were still very concerned with defending the historical truth of their accounts, constantly authorizing their sources by the provenance of their information.\(^\text{16}\)

As the Empire began to disintegrate, various attempts to give a fixed, pre-ordained framework to history were countered by Augustine’s view in which “history is seen as the battlefield of the forces fueled by the love of God (City of God) and those propelled by the love of self and the world (City of the Earth)...,” but “Augustine’s dynamic view found few adherents in medieval historiography with its usually close attachments to secular institutions.”\(^\text{17}\) The lack of any significant political opposition to the Church for most of a millennium meant that its self-understanding was left unchallenged, and the need for any new, synthetic, or re-interpretive history of Church-dominated nations became minimal. Instead, in the medieval period, historiography became reduced to the listing of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, and the production of

\(^{16}\) Momigliano, Classical Foundations, 19-20.

\(^{17}\) Bresiach, “Historiography: an Overview,” 4028.
hagiographies, reinforcing the role and strength of the Church. Gradually, writes Breisach, it became standard historiographical practice to believe that

    God’s will, not human will, governed human events, and hence every event was the result of divine planning and not simply the effect of preceding conditions or human actions. The modern concept of history as a chain of causes and effects, where a given state of affairs results necessarily from its antecedents, was in general foreign to medieval historiography. “18

    According to Breisach, it may have been the new capitalization of certain Italian cities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the consequent need to reform the corpus juris civilis and justify titular claims for lands and commercial rights that revived interest in two key components that would later become important for modern historiography, namely archaeology and textual provenance. This revival of the practice of corroboration reclaimed the critical dimension of Western historiography. Luther’s sixteenth-century condemnation of the medieval Church called for a reinterpretation of European history and a revival of the Augustinian separation of secular history from ecclesiastical history. If the Church was no longer conceived of as adhering to God’s will, then it became once again possible to speak intelligibly of historical reality apart from divine causation. Jean Bodin’s mid-sixteenth century Method for the Easy Understanding of History programmatically separated human history from natural history and from divine history. 19 This separation of profane and sacred historical reasoning, missing in

18 Breisach, Historiography, 127-128.

19 Ibid., 180. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) has long been regarded as an early proponent of the modern use of the “inductive method,” outlined in his 1620 work Novum Ogranum Scientarium (London: M. Jones, 1815 [originally published in 1620]), which attempted to prioritize pure, empirical observation over conceptual categorization.
Western European historiography for most of a millennium, was in all probability ingredient in a new-found freedom to conceive of nature itself as existing separately from direct divine causation, a condition for the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century flowering of scientific enterprise, which featured the cataloguing of phenomena without necessary reference to theological categories. This allowed for the emerging conceptualization of natural phenomena by Francis Bacon as stubborn, “bare,” facts whose *a posteriori* interpretation became as important as their *a priori* designation.  

It was not long before historical events began to be referenced as “bare” facts, allowing for multiple interpretations, both by Bacon himself and, more radically, in the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* of Peter Bayle, who saw truth residing not in generalizations derived from facts but in the very facts themselves. Terrence W. Tilley, building on the work of Michael Buckley, describes how that in this new intellectual climate, given the weakened authority of the papacy, competing national claims to God’s favour in times of war came to be seen as a theological dilemma: ancient questions about how God could favour one’s enemies and abandon the “faithful” nation were raised with renewed pathos, with the horizons of inquiry gradually rising from questions of divine patronage to the search for universal truth. The theological question was no longer, how


21 The first edition was published as *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* in 1697, with an English translation of the second edition in 1709.


could God favour or abandon us, but rather, how could God be said to favour or abandon anyone? Rather than providence being its own justification, justification was demanded by figures such as Voltaire and Montaigne for any claims to identifying divine providence in the course of history. Emboldened by changing political circumstances and the loosening of the ties of Church and state, les philosophes in France and David Hume in England championed historical inquiry as the application of critical thought to ecclesiastical claims made about the past, including those made about the events recorded in holy scripture. With new “principles of reason” and “laws of nature” being propounded by adherents of Descartes and Newton, philosophers such as Leibniz and Vico raised to metaphysical proportions the question as to whether or not historical process imposed, or was subject to, its own universal nomology. Breisach portrays the impact of the Enlightenment this way:

The impact of the authority-shattering humanist text-criticism, the encounters with the many pagan classical works, the radical revision of the image of the world in the geographical discoveries, the shaking of church authority and of faith during the Reformation, the new philosophical and scientific views of the world had done their work. In contemporary histories the Old Testament was doubted as accurate history, and the milestones of sacred history—Creation, Christ’s life and death, and the expectation of the Last Judgment—were used less and less as markers in world histories by historians who increasingly preferred the theologically neutral scheme of ancient, medieval, and modern periods…. Some historians were about to assume no less of a task than to give meaning to the multitude of mundane events whose significance hitherto had been provided by Divine Providence. The patterns of progress or cycles of life they suggested became key figures of the eighteenth century.  

Breisach identifies the advance of science and technology in Europe in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as creating the conditions in which various

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nineteenth-century schema of inevitable historical progress could flourish, such as Comte’s vision of humanity’s movement from theological to metaphysical to modern categories, Hegel’s dialectical idealism, and Marx’s dialectical materialism. History was coming to be viewed less in terms of divinely-ordained freedom than as an extension of the principles of natural existence. In Bresiach’s reading, in their haste to synthesize data and clearly identify the vector of progress, proponents of such large-scale theories of history often rushed to judgement on previous historical process. After a period of celebrating the independence of data from medieval interpretive frameworks, once again the historical scheme came to dominate all historical thinking, and history became intertwined with philosophy, as various attempts were made to define the “laws” of history. The teaching of “history,” at least in the German academy, became dominated by the passing on of the teacher’s historical scheme, replete with historical anecdotes that exemplified the scheme. While historical method had been divorced from its biblical-ecclesiastical foundations, it had quickly become re-traditionalized through a re-interpretation of God’s relationship with the world: if God were not beyond the historical process, perhaps God was within the historical process, directing it through natural and ordinary means.

Modern Historiography

In the nineteenth century, Leopold von Ranke, often hailed as the “father of modern history,” broke with this pedagogical methodology. In its place, von Ranke instituted what became known as the “seminar method,” in which he encouraged his
students to move beyond previous synthesized historical accounts, seek out for themselves all manner of documentation and physical evidence, and engage in active debate over the significance of these various “primary” sources. This new approach deliberately sought to emulate inductive, scientific method. Von Ranke is most famous for his remark that the goal of historical inquiry is to understand the past “how it actually was,” by which he urged his students to suspend their own moral judgement while gathering data, and concern themselves with seeing the period they were studying as much as possible through an imaginative reconstruction of that earlier period’s perspective.  

Johann Gustav Droysen and Max Weber continued von Ranke’s emphasis on the ideological autonomy of the historian and the historian’s duty to allow the data to shape the historian’s perspective, rather than the other way around. Droysen sought to advance on Ranke’s goal of bare neutrality by differentiating among four fundamental types of historical interpretation: the pragmatic, concentrating on the immediate aims of the actors in the historical drama; the conditional, stressing the material conditions within which the drama unfolds; the psychological, dealing in character types and stressing the elements of personality and will in the individual and the masses; and the ethical, contemplating the events under the categories that determine the three spheres of the moral life: material (familial, national, human), ideal (the good, the true, and the beautiful), and practical (law, politics, and economics). In this typology, Droysen distinguished between historical

research and the historian, but recognized that the practical value of historiography required the reintroduction of the historian’s particularity.  

Max Weber ventured that historians could indeed construct “ideal types” based in the historian’s current categories in order to make their historical theories useful—so long as they remembered that these “types” were their own constructions, and not objective historical data. On further reflection, however, Weber understood that even the most disciplined historian was not without preconceptions, and in the early twentieth century declared the attempt to create an axiomatic historical method to be futile. Bresiach summarizes Weber’s position: “From now on [historians] could grasp only aspects and never the whole human situation. A modern intellectual must accept that uncomfortable if not frightful situation.”

Ironically, it was the very attempt to isolate the historian from all ideological biases that threw the spotlight on the historian’s role in doing history. Between the first and second world wars, R. G. Collingwood upheld the ideal of the autonomous historian examining the indeterminate historical process by identifying history as a science whose object is human action: “The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has


done and thus what man is.” A geologist and an archaeologist both deal with the past; the geologist, in Collingwood’s view, is not a historian, but an archaeologist is, because only the latter’s object is uncovering past human intention. Collingwood understood the issues that would later come to public attention in the post-modern critique of historical method when he declared that “[t]he historian himself... is a part of the process he is studying.” However, like Vico before him, Collingwood believed that the subjective involvement of the historian did not necessarily obscure the data, but was necessary to doing history, because in subjective involvement—the human factor—lay the critical congruence of historical inquiry and its object.

Collingwood was not alone in his views. March Bloch, a Jewish-French participant in both European wars, arrested for his part in the resistance movement against the Nazis, was acutely aware that the historian’s work was affected by subjectivity not only in the writing, but also in the disseminating of the results: “Nearly always, the nature of the error is determined in advance. More particularly, it does not spread, it does not take life, unless it harmonizes with the prejudices of public opinion.” Bloch concluded that, properly speaking, “Historical facts are, in essence, psychological facts” in the interpreter’s mind, as differentiated from “scientific facts,” which are

30 Ibid., 248.
external to the observer.\(^{32}\) This did not cause Bloch to despair of the value of historical inquiry, though; he believed, for instance, that critical thinking could be applied to understand causal connections among historical events, and that sufficient conditions could be (and must be) distinguished from efficient causes.

Writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, Edward Hallett Carr concurred with this call for a self-critical approach: “The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which is very hard to eradicate.”\(^{33}\) Rather than despairing that historical inquiry could ever rise above relativism, Carr likened ongoing historiography to “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”\(^{34}\) In his generation, Carr was heir to the popularization of Marxist theory, psychoanalysis, and even the science of operant conditioning, all of which emphasized unconscious factors in individual and collective behaviour. Doing history, he contended, was more than Collingwood’s isolation of human intention as history’s object, and should also include unintentional factors, such as those of the unconscious mind: “What the historian is called on to investigate is what lies behind the act; and to this the conscious thought or motive of the

\(^{32}\) Bloch, *Historian’s Craft*, 194


\(^{34}\) *Ibid.*, 35
individual may be quite irrelevant.” Carr sought to discern general principles of cause-and-effect within the unfolding of history, believing that understanding would lead to mastery: “The object of the study [of science, social science, and history] is the same: to increase man’s understanding of, and mastery over, his environment.”

As the Cold War began to take hold of the political and intellectual climate in the West, there was an understandably strong reaction against any understanding of history that was systematic enough to invoke the spectre of historical determinism, which was associated with Marxist theory and communism. Karl Popper argued syllogistically against any predictability in history from the limitations of the historian in doing history: “(1) The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge.... (2) We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge.... (3) We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history.” By such arguments, Popper said, “I wish to defend the view, so often attacked by historicists, that history is characterized by its interest in actual, singular, or specific events, rather than in laws or generalizations.” G.R. Elton also championed the unpredictability of historical processes, citing the nature the discipline: “History is ‘idiographic,’ that is, it particularizes, and not ‘nomothetic,’ that is, designed to establish

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35 Ibid., 65.
36 Ibid., 111.
general laws.” Taking aim at all attempts to find any necessary scheme for the historical process, which he considered to be the projection of an ideological template onto the “facts” of history, Elton said, “When Mr. Carr, and others, seek a purpose in history, they are trying to fill a vacuum created when God was removed from history.”

Postmodern Historiography

By the latter part of the twentieth century, the debate was shifting ground, from whether or not the historical process followed clear and certain principles and patterns to the propensity or even the psychological or ideological necessity of the historian to project those principles and patterns onto the historical process. Increased criticism and scepticism caused interest in grand interpretative schemes to wane, as even those who had fought for a more idiographic approach to historical research were aware that they were never completely free from interpretative frameworks.

Hayden White contends that this inevitable influence of interpretative frameworks is rooted in the natural human impulse to narrate in a way that offers meaning: “The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama.”

Greek drama, Roman biography, medieval Christian hagiography,

39 Ibid., 40.
40 Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse in Historical Representation (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1987), 21.
dialectical materialism, progressive historicism, and every other kind of fact-based narrative is constructed and communicated for the purpose of sharing meaning: this is what it means for an event to be historical. Natural events, isolated facts, and even chronicles lack meaning until they are seen as part of a process which humans would find significant by being, in some way or another, relevant to themselves or their own observations about the world around them. In appreciative reference to Paul Ricoeur, White says that

historical events possess the same structure as narrative discourse. It is their narrative structure that distinguishes historical events from natural events (which lack such a structure). It is because historical events possess a narrative structure that historians are justified in regarding stories as valid representations of such events and treating representations of them as explanations of them.\(^41\)

White acknowledges Ricoeur’s contribution of the idea that because we necessarily live within larger narrative frameworks, historiography is not merely descriptive but performative, that is, partially prescriptive of further historiography, because it establishes the narrative framework we inhabit. While at times it appears that White is arguing that the historical process in itself—that is, apart from its being perceived—possesses a narrative structure, he more often maintains that historical events are human constructions—abstractions from past reality—and therefore possess narrative structure. Ultimately, he wants to argue for both alternatives: if historical events—as opposed to merely past or “actual” events—are those involving human persons, and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{41}} \text{Ibid., 171. Here White cites Paul Ricoeur’s Time and Narrative, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), and Time and Narrative, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985), as well as The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).} \]
human persons always live narratively, that is, within their own personal and cultural narratives, then historical events are in themselves essentially narrative, and must be reconstructed narratively. In this way White argues that historiography is more than mere representation of real events, divorced from the reality it depicts. Rather,

> [h]istorical events can be distinguished from actual events by virtue of the fact that they are products of the actions of human agents seeking, more or less self-consciously, to endow the world in which they live with symbolic meaning. Historical events can therefore be represented realistically in symbolic discourse, because such events are themselves symbolic in nature.\(^2\)

Since human agents are the antagonists of and participants in historical events, historical events are *in themselves* full of meaning for human interpreters: narrative structure is imposed by the historian, but that does not mean that historical events are not narrative by nature.

If White is right, then what is history? Is it literature? Is it poetry? Is it myth-making? Judged against the standard of modern science, White’s acknowledgement of the constructive role of the historian in doing history summarizes the postmodernist crisis of confidence in the ability of the historical method to produce clear and certain knowledge. While this view was certainly implicit in earlier acknowledgements of the involvement of the historian in “doing history,” some scholars began to draw out radical

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implications regarding the inherent yes-but-no or “duplicitous” quality of (1) all claims to universality, (2) reference to textuality; and (3) the parameters of discourse.43

Postmodern Critique of Universality

If all historiography is subject to the historian’s perspective, then any claim to universality in historical writing is duplicitous. The breakdown of traditional Christian historiography in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and the failure of any one scheme to replace it in Western consciousness, left historians with a multiplicity of historical schemes and perspectives, and entailed the admission that all claims to universality are duplicitous. Collingwood acknowledged that the historian selects, constructs, and criticizes; and Carr had characterized historical inquiry as “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”44 Even the historian per se is a person subject to historical process: “The historian, then, is... a social phenomenon, both the product and the conscious or unconscious spokesman of the society to which he belongs.”45

In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, changing conditions had pressed the issue of the historian’s involvement in doing history harder than ever before. The waning of the British Empire, the increased mobility of people by means of


44 Carr, What is History? 35.

45 Ibid., 42.
improving transportation technologies, and the growth of anthropology as an academic discipline all contributed to the awareness that there is no single, neutral, “reasonable” perspective that could be assumed, even among scholars. The ascendancy of the United States challenged the older “first world” worldview of cultures separated by national borders, while in America the impact of the civil rights movement and the feminist movement challenged assumptions of white supremacy and male superiority. Steven Feierman describes how incorporating African history within the Eurocentric discipline of history will need to involve much more than simply writing new chapters in the historian’s supposedly universal narrative: “The core of the problem, in this instance, is not a vision of the historical process as originating in Europe; it is the unproblematized use of a word—‘civilization’—with deep European roots.” Feierman points out as examples the vastly different conceptions around money, servitude, and marriage not only between Africans and Europeans but among Africans themselves that effectively prevents European historians from translating African experience into European terms:

Once historians of Africa took exotic cultures out of their “culture gardens” and into their own world, that world no longer existed in the same form. Treating Africans and women, peasants and slaves as historical actors presented a fundamental challenge to general historical understanding. It challenged the notion that history told from the point of view of a narrower and less representative population was value-neutral or universal.


47 Ibid., 52.
The postmodern critique of any pretension to simple, empirical objectivity in historical research has served to name the ever-present danger of tacit, collectively prejudicial influences in privileging accepted narratives, which can retard or even preclude new discoveries by proscribing the kinds of questions deemed acceptable. This critique demands that the identification and interpretation of any historical event requires the self-identification of the historian’s particular interpretative framework whereby the historian frames, analyzes, and situates the event under consideration within a larger cultural narrative. In the early part of the twenty-first century, historians are becoming resigned to the prospect of forever relinquishing the presumption of a universal perspective. Professional historians are becoming used to identifying their peculiar perspective, remaining humbler about the limitations of their work, and generally conceding the *liberating* function of the postmodern critique of universality. Clark, for instance, comments on the usefulness of the postmodern critique for patristics:

Among the ‘mental tools’ that [postmodern] theory offers scholars of patristic Christianity are (1) an examination of ‘authorial function’ that calls into question attributions of intention and context; (2) symptomatic and Derridean readings that attend to the gaps, absences, and *aporias* in texts; (3) ideology critique, especially helpful in unpacking the early Christian writers’ representations of ‘Others,’ including women; and (4) postcolonial discourse theory that helps to illuminate the ways in which Christianity and Empire intertwined.48

Unless the perpetual incompleteness of a discipline negates its accomplishments, the postmodern critique of historiography does not invalidate historical inquiry. Rather, the postmodern critique of universality has actually energized new voices to participate in

48 Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 170
historical discussion, and encouraged all historians to see themselves as active learners as well as transmitters of a “given” tradition, rejoicing in rather than rueing what Carr said half a century ago: “If the philosopher is right in telling us that we cannot step into the same river twice, it is perhaps equally true, and for the same reason, that two books cannot be written by the same historian.”

Postmodern Critique of Confidence in Textuality

If historiography is dependent upon sources that themselves are subject to the peculiarities of the historian’s ideological commitments, social placement, and changing life-circumstances, then it is true to some degree that all texts are duplicitous. If the aim of historical inquiry is, in whole or in part, the reconstruction of past mental events in the present, then texts both help and hinder the process. In the rather routine case of someone reading a historian’s work that is based on a historic text—all judgement on its historical accuracy suspended—it can be supposed that (1) no observer recalls with full exactitude what they saw; (2) no author writes with full exactitude what is in his or her mind; (3) no historian comprehends with full exactitude the meaning of the text intended by the author; and (4) no historian writes with full exactitude what is in his or her mind; and that (5) no reader of the historian’s work comprehends with full exactitude what the historian has written.

Roland Barthes raised this postmodernist critique in regards to all literary texts, historical documents included. He believed that the goal of classic literary criticism was

to understand the author: “The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us.”  

Barthes considered the idea of authorship in this sense to be illusory, because “the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.” He decried the seeking of the meaning of a text in its original inspiration, and extended this systematic refusal to metaphysical levels:

Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. . . . In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a “secret,” an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.  

Barthes’ counter proposal was the courageous admission that the reader was the locus of meaning, “the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.... The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”

Few historians have wanted to surrender completely to Barthes’ conclusions, as doing so would profoundly disconnect the texts used as evidence in historical research not only from our reconstruction of the text’s author but from their subject matter as well.


Bloch had written regarding historical inquiry that “the nature of our intelligence is such that it is stimulated far less by the will to know than by the will to understand... explanatory relationship between phenomena.”\(^{56}\) But how can the historian confidently claim to understand the relationship between events without first claiming to understand the texts that report them? Elton claims that the historian “cannot escape the first condition of his enterprise, which is that the matter he investigates has a dead reality independent of the enquiry. At some time these things actually once happened....”\(^{57}\) This boldness, however, is warranted only by bracketing the fact that in most historical research what historians actually have in hand are not first-hand experiences of events, but documents.

That does not mean, however, that historians have simply ignored the problematic nature of text-based research. Historians since ancient Greece have been critical of their textual sources, examining their provenance and considering the multiplicity of possible motivations for their having been composed, and being willing to take their relative reliability into account. Richard J. Evans credits Jacques Derrida’s influence in helping present-day historians recall that what \textit{is not} in a text may be just as important as what \textit{is}. The multiplication of questions now considered legitimate for historians to ask as a result of the loss of the claim to universality has enabled us to ask more, not less, of a text. Though many practicing historians claim to eschew the employment of grand

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\(^{56}\) Bloch, \textit{The Historian’s Craft}, 10.

\(^{57}\) Elton, \textit{The Practice of History}, 53.
interpretative theories, theoretical considerations are implicit in any thoroughgoing historian’s work: “The real question at issue here is what enables us to read a source ‘against the grain,’ and here theory does indeed come in.”58 This boldness in questioning historical texts has led to explicit methodological discussions which, Evans says, have actually strengthened historians’ confidence when dealing with sources. While questions regarding the use of texts in historical research are legitimate, “[t]he distinction between primary and secondary sources on the whole has survived the withering theoretical hail rained down upon it by postmodernists.”59 Awareness of the conditioned nature of texts and the necessarily conditioned perspective of the reader of texts does not programmatically exclude the usefulness of texts for historical research, but can rather serve to open the mind of the historian to new perspectives and avenues of dialogue once closed off due to unquestioned assumptions and unconscious ideology.

Postmodern Critique of Historical Discourse

If all historical inquiry involves unstated but effective parameters of relevance, then all claims to absolute freedom of interpretation within historical discourse are duplicitous. Interpreting texts always involves an overarching framework for their interpretation. Von Ranke’s respect for the historically-conditioned nature of every text, Weber’s caution that all ideal types can only be regarded as provisional, and Elton’s


59 Evans, In Defense of History, 126.
reminder that the results of historical inquiries are only “probable” are all admirable methodological provisos, but they are all negative: they do not identify any “true north” for historical inquiry. Historical inquiry itself, in order to be rationally engaged, presumes some value to its own exercise. Even George Santayana’s famous call for historical inquiry, “Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness…. when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it…”, contains within it a host of metaphysical assumptions: that there is moral capacity within humanity to differentiate the more desirable from the less desirable, that there is discernible and demonstrable durable value in certain structures, that these structures can exist in more than one generation of a particular culture, that progress from lesser value to greater value is possible, and that historical inquiry into the past aids in the retention of greater value within a culture through the passage of time. These assumptions, when viewed collectively, reflect a framework for understanding historical existence within an evolutionary framework of at least potential progress that can be described in narrative terms. This narrative framework, whether construed in biblical, mythopoeic terms or in Comtian, rationalist terms, is not inarguable, but what may be inarguable is the necessity of historical method producing its narrative accounts by employing and working within some overarching narrative framework, within some discernible meta-narrative.

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The metanarrative employed, whether consciously or unconsciously, influences the perceived relevance of the gathered elements and the connections made between them. The relevance and evidentiary value of the proclamation of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for instance, would presumably be construed quite differently by an author extolling the emergence of humanism on the one hand and an author bewailing the coming apocalyptic destruction of our civilization on the other. Considering European historiography, the perceived failure of modernity to replace the meta-narrative of traditional historiography with an alternative meta-narrative prompted Carr not to despair but rather to poetically call on his colleagues to leave the relative security of specialized inquiries and search for the grail of an overarching interpretative framework:

This was the age of innocence, and historians walked in the Garden of Eden, without a scrap of philosophy to cover them, naked and unashamed before the god of history. Since then, we have known Sin and experienced a Fall; and those historians who today pretend to dispense with a philosophy of history are merely trying, vainly and self-consciously, like members of a nudist colony, to recreate the Garden of Eden in their garden suburb.61

Less poetically but more subtly, White agrees that there can ultimately be no interpretation without employing some kind of meta-narrative, whether implicit or explicit in the process of interpretation; the duplicity of textuality calls historians to acknowledge the importance of the implicit hermeneutics embedded in any particular

historical discourse: “the real subject of any discussion on the proper form of historical discourse ultimately turns on a theory of the true content of history itself.”

Whatever is regarded to be the meta-narrative, or the “true content of history,” sets the parameters for historical inquiry, and as such is subject to the control exercised by its participants, who decide among themselves what is admissible to the conversation. In the context of historical inquiry, all discourses are duplicitous, as individuals and institutions avowedly committed to freedom of expression and open dialogue in fact contribute, often without explicit justification, to the creation and maintenance of the discourse’s boundaries. Michel Foucault, a one-time seminarian, recognized this in his theological training, but found this to be true of the secular academy as well, especially in cases where classic texts such as Marx’s Das Kapital or Freud’s The Interpretation of Dreams were considered standards of orthodoxy. Where classic texts are considered to be normative, the use of the author’s name invokes unspoken rules for the discourse, to the point where “the function of the author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within society.” The seamlessness and consistency of classic texts are taken as articles of faith, and deviation from this norm of conversation results in the would-be participant on the outside looking in. These observations about the nature of discourse led Foucault and others to declare that not only is all truth socially-

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62 White, The Content of the Form, 40.

conditioned, but truth is essentially socially-created, and, like texts, bears no necessary relationship to external referents.

While generalizations are always suspect, it may be safe to say that while all historians are perfectly willing to concede that discourses do not necessarily relate truthfully to reality, few historians are willing to concede that this means discourse is incapable of, or unnecessary to, our relating to reality. Professional historians in the first part of the twenty-first century may be willing to concede that all historical work is to some extent conditioned by the perspective of the historian, but they are also aware that absolutizing such scepticism makes the historical enterprise impossible.

Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob represent the broader rejection among historians of such epistemological dead ends. Claiming the heritage of American pragmatism (Charles Peirce, John Dewey), they advocate the inclusion of “practical realism” within historical method, which “rejects the relativism inherent in questioning all claims on principle… Realists accept the objectivity of objects and consider the objects’ frequent resistance to accurate representations as an invitation to further investigation.”64 The necessarily provisional and conditioned nature of historiography does not mean its relation to historical events is irrelevant. They protest, for instance, Moleti Kete Asante’s proposal to insist without foundation that Greek philosophy and art originated in Africa, even with the admirable end of promoting a consciousness of African history among African-American students: in their view, pragmatism does not

dispense altogether with the need for correspondence of truth-claims to actual events. They admit that in America, as elsewhere, “historians now confront the task of creating a new narrative framework,” but insist that this be done in rejection of the tendency of “historians… avoiding the language of explanation so completely that they sometimes appear to deny any validity at all to hypotheses about causation.”  

Instead, they propose a modified version of nineteenth-century confidence, and a chastened employment of discourse, hoping to consolidate the gains made for the discipline of history while acknowledging the potency of the postmodern critique:

The nineteenth-century social scientists’ invention of structure, with its corollaries of patterning, process, and interacting systems of causation, represents a powerful intellectual tool for understanding social action. Modern Westerners cannot live without causal language and generalizations about human behavior because these organize their reality. Without heuristic concepts of such things as nation, culture, class, ethnicity, education, global economy, the complexity of life would break down into a welter of isolated facts. People want to make sense of their world, even if explanations are proved to be necessarily partial.

Such acceptance of the conditioned nature of twenty-first century historiography relates directly to our approach to the New Testament documents as historical sources, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Post-postmodern Historiography

Doing history has not ceased due to the postmodern critique, but historians are much more self-conscious in recent decades, and have begun to explore ways to bring

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65 Ibid., 294, 303.
66 Ibid., 305.
together the best of traditional, modern, and postmodern historiography. Traditional historiography embraced its metaphysical assumptions and working metanarrative and understood historical events within such frameworks. Modern historiography embraced the scientific paradigm’s openness to allowing historical phenomena challenge and critique such frameworks. Postmodern historiography embraced the inevitability of employing such frameworks while demanding that such frameworks be made explicit.

In responding to the postmodernist critique, C.T. McIntire calls for a multi-dimensional historiography, venturing that not only can all reality be spoken of in relation to a meta-narrative, but that it is theoretically within the scope of the historian’s work to describe the “ultimate dimension” of meaning *intrinsic* to historical events:

Most broadly cast, my proposal is that reality—our world—exists according to three dimensions.... The historical dimension is the phenomenon identifiable as the temporal process coming into being, carrying on, modifying, perhaps developing, and then passing away.... The structural (or ontic) dimension of a phenomenon is the phenomenon identifiable as a structure or system with a particular inner constitution or make-up.... The ultimate dimension is the phenomenon identifiable as a manifestation of the meaning of reality and as a disclosure of good and evil, alienation and liberation, sin and salvation.  

For McIntire, then, the historian is also by necessity a metaphysician and a theologian, because history is not only about the identification of past temporal processes, or analysis of their perennial ontic structures, but history is also concerned with the meaning of these as they influence our decisions about our future: “Understanding time as a past-present-future relationship has important consequences for how we study history. It means that,

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contrary to a longstanding wisdom, historical study is not simply about the past but about past-present-future.”\textsuperscript{68} McIntire claims that considering the ultimate dimension of historical events is similar to what not only philosophers but economists and sociologists do in their respective fields of inquiry: they are affected by, and in turn affect, norms, values, and desired outcomes.

McIntire’s approach seeks to admit the potency of Foucault’s ethical critique of discourse without rendering knowledge of the external world and its past impossible. The historian still needs to be methodical, analytical, and self-declared as to the moral values imbedded in the interpreted framework employed. By comprehending the influence of the past upon the present—in fact, the very inclusion of the past in the present, in anticipation of a desired future—the historical remains historical, but is not merely historical.

McIntire says that Christian historians would doubtless be guided by “biblical insight,” that upholds the dimensions of time and the uniqueness of each historical event. The value-laden terms that McIntire uses to describe the ultimate dimension of historical events are logically replaceable, but in each case those chosen by the historian will in fact—consciously or unconsciously, clearly or unclearly, consistently or inconsistently—be grounded by a particular meta-narrative, complete with a justification in the past and some sort of vindication of preferred alternatives in the future.

Eric Cochrane, after disavowing some apologetic pro-Vatican historiography of recent centuries, believes that that in this regard the Catholic historian may possess advantages over the secular historian. First, the Catholic historian should be sensitive to

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 27.
and perhaps knowledgeable of theology, which has played an important role in European and North American history. Second, the Catholic historian will not be hemmed in by any mechanistic scheme of interpretation, but instead “admit the possibility that individual wills, passions, and perceptions of the divine, no matter how hemmed in they may be by economic curves and social structures, can be active agents in the historical process.”

Third, an authentic Catholic historiography will respect the “sanctity of vocations” and keep the historian true to the heuristics of the discipline, and not be swayed by considerations of personal gain. Further, the Catholic historian, because of his theological and metaphysical commitments, “while insisting upon the autonomy of history as a discipline,... will remember that history is not identical with the whole of reality.”

Such an expanded understanding of historical inquiry seeks to rehabilitate that which was lost with the demise of traditional historiography, the loss of which was identified by the postmodern critique: the identification of the sacred to orient historiography. While in the traditional historiography of the ancient world this was principally the recollection of a “sacred past,” Jewish historiography, affected by the Exile, developed a future, eschatological dimension as well, placing current events clearly within, rather than at the end of, a certain meta-narrative. As the World Council of Churches’ document “God in Nature and History” put it:

History for Israel was no longer a part of nature. Unlike nature, it is directed towards a goal.... So Israel believed in the ultimate significance of her historical


70 Ibid., 454-455.
encounter with God; she believed that in this encounter the final reality was disclosed, and that this reality is the key to the understanding of all things, in nature and history, from creation to consummation.\footnote{World Council of Churches, “God in Nature and History,” in C.T. McIntire, ed. \textit{God, History, and Historians: an Anthology of Modern Christian Views of History} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 296.}

Such a view was incorporated, to varying degrees, in most traditional Christian historiography, in which conformity to an ideal past or anticipation of an ideal future alternately came to the forefront in the Church’s thinking in various centuries.

Maintaining such a view, however, required the foundational belief that “History is the work of the sovereign God.”\footnote{Ibid., 323.} The disenchantment of nature that took place with the rise of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries combined with widespread rejection of the Church’s authority and questions of God’s sovereignty in the face of wars among Christian nations, together served to set Western scholarship on the search for a different, or at least thoroughly revised, meta-narrative. Exploration took place both in the search for a constant, non-narrative, ultimate explanation of historical reality on the one hand, and a revival of cyclical (Vico) or inherently progressive (Hegel) worldviews on the other. While this search yielded grand frameworks of interpretation, it failed to produce a widely-accepted sense of \textit{meaning} to contingent, historical existence. Dialectical materialism offered an atheistic alternative to the medieval Christian meta-narrative, but its deterministic dimension removed ultimate significance from the phenomenon of human freedom, and effectively failed to “re-mythologize” human existence. The deeply-felt, quintessentially human need for a meta-narrative, at least in


\footnote{Ibid., 323.}
the post-Christian west, lingers on, even if that meta-narrative is very different from that which Christianity propounds. Charles Taylor points out that the rejection of the Christian narrative is not a rejection of narrative, but the displacement of that narrative with another, secular narrative that attempts to accord some form of victory to modern science has having triumphed over—or at least survived the clash with--religion:

The narrative dimension is extremely important, because the force of these CWS [closed world systems] comes less from the supposed detailed argument (that science refutes religion, or that Christianity is incompatible with human rights), and much more from the general form of the narratives, to the effect that there was once a time when religion could flourish, but that this time is past.... In a certain sense, the original arguments on which this narrative rests cease to matter, so powerful is the sense created in certain milieu, that these old views just can’t be options for us. 73

Udo Schnelle expresses sensitivity to this need. He begins his work on the theology of the New Testament with the observation that human understanding requires underlying processes of meaning-formation that confirm, expand, or create new points of departure for self-orientation. As one of those processes, “the writing of history is thus never an uncontaminated reproduction of ‘what happened.’ Rather, each act of history-writing includes something of its own history—the history, that is of its writer!” 74 Because of this, it is true that “Events are not [in themselves] history; they become history.... And yet we by no means give up on reference to actual events,” 75 because we share the intuition that it is only through actual events that we can press on to discover

73 Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2007), 590.
75 Ibid., 30.
the meaning of reality. Religion is the way that human beings search for meaning, as that which “constitutes the symbolic universe as such. Far and away more than law, philosophy, or political ideologies, religion claims to represent the one, all-encompassing reality that transcends all other realities: God, or The Holy.” Understanding history in terms of meaning-formation, then, implies that

[a] historical event is not meaningful in and of itself, nor does it play a role in the formation of identity, until its meaning potential has been inferred and established. This potential must be transferred from the realm of chaotic contingency into an “orderly, meaningful, intelligible contingency.” The fundamental construct that facilitates this transfer is narration, for narrative sets up the meaning structure that makes it possible for human beings to come to terms with historical contingency. This is the form in which both the innermost human self and external events can be expressed.76

As White pointed out, our accounting for our existence demands narrative structure—beginning, middle, and end—because we live in the passing of time.

Although narrative representation can be accused of falsifying historical events by placing them within a narrative framework that is not demonstrably universal, and of losing comprehensibility via textual transmission or the restrictions of discourse, narrative is so fundamental to the human search for meaning that it cannot be dispensed with. It should therefore not surprise us that explication of a religiously significant event such as the resurrection of Jesus demands narration: whatever the symbolic value of the resurrection within a larger system of meaning might be, the symbolic content is its narration. In this limited sense, everyone who actively believes or disbelieves the presented narratives of the resurrection of Jesus is an amateur historian.

76 Ibid., 36-37 (emphasis original).
Conclusion

This brief survey may be sufficient to demonstrate that not only are all historical events in some respects the product of their times, but so is all historiography. Worldviews, methodological assumptions, and intended readership all merge in historical method. Historical sources can and must be read not only as transmissions of historical claims but also as examples of historical method, and the method employed by the historiographers must be discerned for a fuller appreciation of the historical information they purport to convey.

If there truly is a new paradigm of historiography emerging in the twenty-first century, one that seeks to steer between the naivety of modernism on the one hand and the despair of postmodernism on the other, readers of the New Testament should take note of this, especially in regard to the extraordinary claims made in the case of the resurrection of Jesus. Especially relevant will be the claims, argued above, that a present-day practicing historian may choose to recognize that (1) ancient historical texts were in fact concerned with the correspondence of their narratives to actual events (Breisach, Momigliano, Burridge); (2) all historical investigations are ultimately undertaken within the parameters of consciously- or unconsciously-held metaphysical and metanarrative considerations (White, Foucault, Barthes); (3) historical investigations are of greatest value when the truth about historical events is allowed to challenge and even alter the historian’s initial metaphysical and metanarrative considerations (C.T. McIntire, Cochrane, Schnelle). Whether or not the resurrection can be legitimately considered in
such a manner within the purview of the professional historian is the subject of what follows.
CHAPTER THREE: IT TOOK A MIRACLE

Throughout the twentieth century theologians and New Testament scholars discussed the distinction between history and theology. This discussion was often directly related to claims to the miraculous, with special interest in accounts of the resurrection of Jesus within the narratives of the canonical Gospels, the book of Acts, and Paul’s writings, and displayed varying assumptions about the nature of the New Testament documents as holy scripture, the nature of Christian faith, and the nature of the universe in which historical events are and can be said to have taken place. Among many theologians, an identifiably modern historiography, which sought to model itself after modern scientific method, was not so much argued for as assumed: the growing acceptance of modern scientific thought as fundamental for the establishment of truth and meaning was taken up around the turn of the twentieth century not only by historians but by theologians relating to the sacred texts of the early Church as if they were historical accounts subject to historical criticism like any other ancient documents.

This development produced a reaction among other theologians who questioned both the theological and historical method involved. What follows is a brief account of that conversation, featuring some of the most widely influential theologians of the twentieth century, chosen for the magnitude of their contribution to the question of the methodological relationship of theology to history. I will outline Troeltsch’s three criteria for distinguishing “historical” method from “dogmatic” method. I will then trace the reaction to the issues raised by these criteria by Martin Kahler, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl
Barth, and others in the first half of the twentieth century, and Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Hans Urs von Balthasar in the second half of the century. I will then introduce recent examples of specific arguments made in regard to the resurrection of Jesus in order to reflect on the utility of Troeltsch’s criteria following the twentieth century discussion of them.

Troeltsch’s Historical Principles

Ernst Troeltsch lived during a time of social, political, and technological upheaval, and observed how once-cherished orthodoxies of every kind were susceptible to being overcome by new ones. Familiar with nineteenth century criticism of historical claims made in the name of traditional Christian theology, such as those by David Strauss,¹ and an heir to the theological tradition of Hegel, Troeltsch came to believe that reason and historical criticism were key factors in doing theology in a responsible manner in the modern era. In “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,” Troeltsch identified himself with the enterprise of constructing theology on the foundation of historical study in continuity with the work done “from the very beginning of historical criticism.”² He believed that historical research could ground the claim of Christianity to represent the


supreme “disclosure of divine reason.”3 What Troeltsch called “the dogmatic method” consisted ultimately in deriving historical truths from theological axioms, while what he called “the historical method” consisted ultimately in deriving theological truths from the results of responsible historical inquiry. By lending definition to these terms, Troeltsch’s axioms became the centre of discussion for twentieth-century theologians wrestling with the question of the relationship of history to theology.

While Troeltsch could say that each method of seeking religious truth “has its own foundation and problems” and “each is consistent within itself,” his chief concern was “to insist on their incompatibility”—and the clear superiority of the historical method.4 He opposed the mixing of these two methodologies, especially where dogmatic assertions of divine causation are invoked to shore up difficulties in otherwise natural theology: “By no means do needs and claims indicate some higher reality removed from historical relativity and criticism.... Should one admire the modesty of a theology that has come to the point of finding its ultimate foundation in a gap?”5 He believed that a more respectable approach could be found in the consistent application of a historical method that contained “three essential aspects,” which have become widely referred to as the principle of criticism, the principle of analogy, and the principle of correlation.6

3 Ibid., 27.
4 Ibid., 25.
5 Ibid., 31.
6 Ibid., 13-14.
The principle of criticism, Troeltsch argued, asserts that all purported historical events are subject to historical criticism. Since past events are not self-evidently historical, that is, they are deemed to be historical by the historian, they can only be said to be historical to a given degree of certainty provided by the application of historical criticism. Employing the principle of criticism therefore renders all historical judgements as more or less probable. As applied to religious reasoning, Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) had called this the “ugly, broad ditch, which I cannot get across”\(^7\): if religious faith is based on historical events, which are only probable, that renders religious convictions as merely probable—and how can merely probable conclusions be adequate for religious faith? For Troeltsch, mature religiosity called for embracing this ultimate uncertainty regarding historical conclusions while building ethical life and civilization on the best available information: “connections between faith and fact are themselves not isolated and unconditioned but are most closely correlated with a much larger historical context; they arise out of this context, they share its substance, and they must be understood in relation to it.”\(^8\)

The principle of analogy, Troeltsch argued, asserts that “agreement with normal, customary, or at least frequently attested happenings and conditions as we have experienced them is the criterion of probability for all events that historical criticism can recognize as having actually or possibly happened.” Although Troeltsch claimed that “the


\(^8\) *Ibid.*, 17.
omnipotence of analogy implies the similarity (in principle) of all historical events,” he did not detail precisely what kinds of events would qualify as “normal, customary, or at least frequently attested.” Troeltsch refused to follow practitioners of the dogmatic method and simply exempt all biblical events from the principle of analogy on the foundation of a doctrine of divine inspiration, and believed that the calls for such exemptions were in any case waning: “Jewish and Christian history are thus made analogous to all other history. Actually, fewer and fewer historical ‘facts’ are regarded as exempt from the exigencies of the analogical principle; many would content themselves with placing Jesus’ moral character and the resurrection in this category.” These exceptions did not constitute failure of historical method in Troeltsch’s mind, since it was historical method that was capable of establishing that a God distinct from nature produced [in Jesus] a personality superior to nature with eternally transcendent goals and the willpower to change the world... which to anyone sensitive enough to catch its echo in one’s own soul, seems to be the conclusion of all previous religious movements and the starting point of a new phase in the history of religion, in which nothing yet has emerged.¹⁰

The principle of correlation, Troeltsch argues, asserts that “all historical happening is knit together in a permanent relationship of correlation,” requiring that historical causes be found to explain historical effects.” For Troeltsch this is the very foundation of all historical method, and the most obvious of the three principles: historical inquiry can only proceed on the belief that the nature of historical events can be

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inferred from their causes and effects. Troeltsch vigorously opposed what he construed to be an inherent dualism in that dogmatic method which allows the inquirer to infer the action of God that violates God’s own established laws of nature; such an approach, Troeltsch said, “has become untenable for anyone who has become historically sensitive.”¹¹ Van Harvey, writing in 1969, characterizes Troeltsch’s conclusion this way: “Actually, Troeltsch believed the church had no real option, because it is impossible even to think without the new assumptions. They have already penetrated to the deepest levels of Western man’s consciousness. They are part of the furniture of the mind.”¹² John Macquarrie elaborates how for Troeltsch this was not the challenging of Christian faith but its vindication, saying that “man’s history is conceived by Troeltsch as taking place against the background of an immanentist theism. God is the universal consciousness, the reality in which all things exist, and the ground of values. In the history of religion, the idea of God gains increasing content, and the contribution of Christianity has been an outstanding one.”¹³

Each discipline has its own methodological tenets, and Troeltsch clearly delineated the tenets of modern historical method as it was understood within an emerging worldview of his day, one characterized by immanentist theism or deism, and a growing confidence in the sufficiency of scientific method to provide not only facts but


their meaning as well. It is certainly true that historical method can be employed within such a worldview, but it is by no means clear that such a worldview is the only one that can be responsibly held, especially among those desiring to demonstrate allegiance to Christian faith. Further, while Troeltsch went further than perhaps anyone before him in Western history in exploring the methodological assumptions of historical inquiry, there were further explorations to come, and the relationship of theological method and historical method continued to evolve.

Troeltsch’s Long Shadow: Kahler, Bultmann, Barth

Martin Kähler responded not so directly to Troeltsch as to the entire nineteenth century “Quest” for the historical Jesus, but his response calls into question Troeltsch’s dependence on historical research and its ability to ground Christian faith. He argued that the confessional nature of the Gospels left us unable to separate their genuinely historical elements from their mythological overlay. Understanding historical method along Troetlschian lines, Kähler reasoned that if Jesus were an ordinary man, we have no records of him, and if Jesus were as unique as the Gospels depict, we have no historical method sufficient to analyze the records. The historical Jesus, so-called, was at any rate of little importance: the figure worth rediscovering was the Christ who inspired faith. This figure was truly historic, inasmuch as he was a leading figure in history, and the centre of spiritual orientation for countless men and women. Faith in Christ was not based on the historical credibility of the biblical record or the institutional credibility of the Church, but on Christ’s own credibility:
We want to make absolutely clear that ultimately we believe in Christ, not on account of any authority, but because he himself evokes such faith from us. This thought that Christ himself is the originator of the biblical picture of the Christ is implicit in what was said earlier.14

Kähler also asked, in defense of his own thesis, if it would not be otherwise necessary to pity the ignorance of all those believers in former centuries “if the questions what and who he really was can be established only by ingenious investigation and if it is solely the scholarship of our time which proves itself equal to this task”15

Rudolf Bultmann was deeply influenced by Kähler’s challenge, but in response applied Troeltsch’s principles of historical method to the New Testament with severe results. Applying the principle of criticism to the Gospels, he found them contradictory and deficient in internal chronology, external historical reference, and geography; he found alleged accounts of words and speeches by Jesus to be stylized, formulaic, and lacking in credibility as eyewitness accounts. Applying the principle of analogy, he found the stories of miraculous healings and nature-miracles to be outside the realm of that which could be considered historical data. Applying the principle of correlation, he found more reason to attribute Jesus’ words to the concerns of the early Church than to a first-


15 Ibid., 102.
century Jewish rabbi, concluding that the synoptic Gospels were largely comprised of attempts to re-historicize the kerygma.\textsuperscript{16}

In “The Primitive Kerygma and the Historical Jesus,” Bultmann said that historically there were two basic attempts to connect the historical Jesus to the kerygma of the early Church.\textsuperscript{17} First, it had been claimed by some that we can reconstruct enough of the historical Jesus to justify the shape of the kerygma. Bultman countered with the assertion that our sources don’t allow us to reconstruct anything substantial about the historical Jesus with any certainty. Second, it had been claimed by others that we can reconstruct enough of the historical Jesus to find an embryonic form of the kerygma. Bultmann countered with the assertion that this was irrelevant, since the kerygma doesn’t depend on knowledge of the historical Jesus. The essential message of the New Testament is not about a historical figure, but about the invitation to full and authentic existence, albeit couched in mythological terms. According to Bultmann’s reading, the kerygma has effectively—and properly—taken the place of Jesus. It is in fact the Christ of the kerygma, rather than the historical Jesus, who is the object of faith:

My assertion that it is the Christ of the kerygma and not the person of the historical Jesus who is the object of faith, that the man whom the kerygma addresses may not inquire behind the kerygma for a legitimation offered by


historical research, is often improperly interpreted to mean that I destroy continuity between the historical Jesus and the kerygma.... The Christ of the kerygma is not a historical figure which could enjoy continuity with the historical Jesus. The kerygma which proclaims him is a historical phenomenon, however.\textsuperscript{18}

Whereas Troeltsch was optimistic that at least the character and teachings of Jesus could be traced in the Gospels, and that Christian faith could find its grounding in history, Bultmann believed that form-critical analysis obliterated any confidence in historical research uncovering the historical Jesus or his original message. Serious \textit{historical} students of the Gospels were, in Bultmann’s opinion, left with little more than the bare assertion that Jesus lived and died, with no more historically reliable information than that.

Bultmann did not see this as any cause for despair. Bultmann had developed in conversation with philosopher Martin Heidegger an existentialist framework of temporality, rather than substantiveness, as being the most fundamental condition of human existence, and the possibility of \textit{not} being is the most fundamental question of human existence.\textsuperscript{19} This opened the possibility for Bultmann to believe that leaving aside the need for proof by means of historical legitimation created the very possibility of faith: “Faith does not at all arise from the acceptance of historical facts. That would only lead to legitimizing, whereas the kerygma really calls for faith.”\textsuperscript{20} The glorified and exalted Christ is not a historical phenomenon, but an eternal reality that the kerygma directs our attention to, and it is there that we find and embrace God’s promise of “raising” us to a


\textsuperscript{19}Martin Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time} (London: SCM Press, 1962 [originally published in 1927]).

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., 25.
new and glorious humanity. In the uncompromising application of Troeltsch’s historical method, Bultmann went further than Troeltsch did, and relocated the ground for Christian faith entirely from the past to the present: faith in God’s call to humanity is its own justification. Bultmann, in the end, accepted the permanent disconnection between historical method and theological certainty inherent in Lessing’s image of the “ugly, broad ditch.”

The response of Karl Barth was scathing and vehement, although he shared some of Bultmann’s presuppositions. Barth concurred with Bultmann’s understanding, largely Troeltschian, of what elements constituted modern historical method; Barth, however, was not willing to grant finality to Bultmann’s particular application of modern historical method, but rather relativized it to the dogmatic assertion of the gospel. Further, Barth agreed with Bultmann that credible historical research had produced much uncertainty regarding previous historical claims about Jesus; Barth, however, claimed that the kerygma had always included the historicity of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as internally necessary components. Still further, Barth paralleled Bultmann in admitting an overarching interpretative framework through which to read the kerygma; Barth, however, decried Bultmann’s choice of a contemporary philosophical system and instead sought to employ the biblical salvation-narrative for the purpose.  

In his *Dogmatics*, Barth unleashed an assault on Bultmann’s positions comprised of five rhetorical questions. First, “[i]s it true that a theological statement is valid only

when it can be proved to be a genuine element in the Christian understanding of human existence?” Barth contended that the Christian faith presents a God who is Wholly Other and confronts, rather than confirms, our best understanding of the meaning of human existence. Second, “[i]s it true that an event alleged to have happened in time can be accepted as historical only if it can be proved to be a “historical” fact’ in Bultmann’s sense?—i.e., when it is open to verification by the methods, and above all the tacit assumptions, of modern historical scholarship?” Barth here conflated the ideas of “past” and “historical,” but his point can still be discerned, that otherwise solid testimony of a highly unusual event, or biased testimony of an ordinary event, may, by the application of historical method, be deemed improbable: historical method is capable of rendering a false or incomplete record of the past. Third, “[i]s it true that the assertion of the historicity of an event which is by its very nature inaccessible to ‘historical’ verification, of what we may agree to call the history of saga or legend, is merely a blind acceptance of a piece of mythology, an arbitrary act, a descent from faith to works, a dishonest sacrificium intellectus?” Barth argued that, in the case of the resurrection, contemporary scholars have no particular intellectual advantage over the ancients, since the resurrection was as incredible in the first century as it is in the twentieth; it is believed not because it so credible, but because it is such good news. Fourth, “[i]s it true that modern thought is ‘shaped for good or ill by modern science’? …But what if the modern world-view is not so final as all that?” As if as a sub-point of his first question, Barth here asked if something which is claimed to be God’s proclamation can be properly subjected to the science of any given era. And fifth, “[i]s it true that we are compelled to reject a
statement simply because this statement, or something like it, was compatible with the mythical world-view of the past? Is this enough to make it untenable?’’ Barth here raised the question of translation: if we cannot easily “translate” ancient testimony into our present worldview, is that an indication of the untruthfulness of the record or the limitations of our categories?22

Throughout the decades of debate between Bultmann and Barth and their followers, others tried to find common ground between “the historical Jesus” and “the Christ of faith.” Hans Conzelmann asked if scholars could not agree that the parables genuinely represented the teachings of Jesus, and his proclamation of the imminence of the kingdom displayed his self-consciousness, and that the resurrection was the transformation of the disciples’ indirect Christology to a direct Christology: “The kerygma itself requires a historical exposition of Jesus’ life and preaching.”23 Joachim Jeremias, like Bultmann, used form-critical tools extensively, but believed that at least the teaching of Jesus was recoverable with some certainty; otherwise, “we are in danger of surrendering the affirmation ‘the Word became flesh’ and of dissolving ‘salvation history,’ God’s activity in the man Jesus of Nazareth and in his message; we are in danger of putting the proclamation of the apostle Paul in the place of the good tidings of


Jesus.”

Heinrich Ott wanted to acknowledge that all history is done within a framework of interpretation, and that as we approach the Gospels, “We must take into account these fluid boundaries. This means we cannot in each case simply play off the facts against the interpretation.” And Ernst Käsemann, while despairing of the historian’s ability to reconstruct a “life of Jesus,” believed that certain elements of Jesus’ preaching, such as his self-identification with the inauguration of the reign of God, could be identified as genuine because they were not explicable by reference to either first century Judaism or the kerygma:

He cannot be classified according to the categories either of psychology or of the comparative study of religion or, finally of general history. If he can be placed at all, it must be in terms of historical particularity. To this extent the problem of the historical Jesus is not our invention, but the riddle which he himself sets us.

H. Richard Niebuhr attempted to advance the discussion by distinguishing between historiography “from the inside” and historiography “from the outside.” The historian who works from within the community that has been influenced or even created by particular historical events necessarily reports them differently from one who stands more at arms’ length. Both will have an interest in facticity, but the historian who reports from a perspective of “internal history” will assume a relationship between the events reported and their present significance. For example, reference to divine causation and


specific details that would underscore divine causation might be common-sense inclusions to a historian who is part of the religious community formed by the Exodus; references to hundreds of thousands of people leaving Egypt could be considered consonant with divine causation. Someone from outside that community, however, might report the migration of people from Egypt without reference to divine causation or even the migrants’ religious faith; reference to tens of thousands of people leaving Egypt could be considered more consonant with a natural, if unusual, event. According to Niebuhr, these two perspectives can prove complementary and are not necessarily antithetical.27

Van Harvey, a student of Bultmann, flatly reject Niebuhr’s distinction of history done “from the inside” or “from the outside” as the effective repudiation of all recognizable historical method. Harvey categorically stated: “When faith is used as a justification for believing historical claims that otherwise could not be justified by our normal warrants and backings, the machinery of rational assessment comes to a shuddering halt.”28 Harvey instead believed he had found the answer to the dilemma of associating the Christ of faith with the Jesus of history in James M. Robinson’s identification of Jesus’ existential selfhood with the kerygma on the one hand and as the object of historical inquiry on the other. Harvey sought to hold forth a modern

27 H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan, 1946). Tilley points out that Niebuhr’s distinction might be illuminating for a saga such as the Exodus, which would remain the same kind of event whether the numbers are scaled up or down, but in the case of the resurrection consideration of divine causation includes or excludes the very possibility of the event itself, and has serious repercussions for the viability of the worldview of which it is a component. Cf. Tilley, History, Theology, and Faith (op. cit.), 22-25.

28 Ibid., 112.
worldview, complete with a Troeltschian historical methodology, decrying the retreat of some Christians to a psychological approach to history such as Collingwood’s and therefore reason that “this new view establishes that since there are no facts without interpretation, it is no objection to the New Testament that it continually blends theological interpretation with fact.”  

Harvey granted the participation of the historian in the historical process, but believed, with the majority of historians of his day, that painstaking rationality could preserve neutrality: “The historian, in short, is radically autonomous because of the nature of historical knowledge itself.”

Harvey critiqued Bultmann’s idea of faith, however, as having almost no discernible Christian content; when Bultmann does try and associate his idea of faith with “an act of God in Jesus Christ,” it seems impossible for it not be wrecked on the shoals of biblical criticism. Neither Bultmann nor Barth, said Harvey, “makes clear how it is possible to be both a critical historian and a believer.”  

Harvey forged ahead in this direction, distinguishing among “(1) the actual Jesus, (2) the historical Jesus, (3) the perspectival image or memory-impression of Jesus, and (4) the Biblical Christ.”  

Returning to his mentor, Harvey lifted up the third dimension of knowledge of Jesus, such as might be found in the Gospels or epistles, as critical for faith: the impression that

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Jesus made upon those who encountered him is the same faith, the same encounter that we are invited to have. Concerning the resurrection of Jesus, Harvey acknowledged the impossibility of confirming this using the reigning historical method, and declared, “Christian faith is not belief in a miracle; it is the confidence that Jesus’ witness is a true one…. The resurrection-faith is that Jesus is, in fact, the Word, that this image does, in fact, provide the clue to the understanding of human life.”33 Finally, Harvey moved to separate historical research and faith by distinguishing between the objective assurance and subjective assurance regarding one’s encounter with a perspectival image of Christ, “the belief that the actual Jesus was as the perspectival image pictures him and the belief that the perspectival image does illumine our experience and our relationship to that upon which we are absolutely dependent.”34

Faith and History in Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Balthasar

The question of the relationship of history and theology, so acutely articulated by Troeltsch, continued to concern three of the most influential theologians of the second half of the twentieth century: Wolfhart Panneberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Each of these wrestled with the question of how faith can appropriate God’s action, including the resurrection of Jesus, within the historical process, and how the discipline of history might account for this, by questioning modern historical method’s dependence on certain metaphysical assumptions.

33 Ibid., 274.
34 Ibid., 281.
Pannenberg saw the historian’s task not as imposing a modern metaphysical template over historical texts, but as entering into a dialogue with them that opens the historian to the possibility of having his or her preconceptions modified by the preconceptions inherent in the text: “Thus, the interpreter, after he is aware of the distance between the text and his own, customary horizon (1), arrives at the formation of a new, comprehensive horizon (2), and in that way is able to go beyond the limits of his original mode of questioning and preconception (3)”; this finding of a new, comprehensive horizon “is always a creative act.”

History, says Pannenberg, is the most comprehensive horizon of Christian theology, history moving toward a future still hidden from the world but already revealed in Jesus Christ. The reader of the New Testament finds a horizon in which the end of history is “provisionally and proleptically accessible... from the history of Jesus in its relationship to the Israelite-Jewish tradition.”

In Pannenberg’s view, Troeltsch understands the Christian faith as being one more, albeit the latest and most significant, step in the unfolding of the divine ethic in the world’s historical process, such that, broadly speaking, any revelation in the historical process is the uncovering of what is eternally true. Pannenberg finds this perspective difficult to harmonize with the Biblical emphasis on the “new” thing that God had promised to the people of Israel and which arrived in Jesus Christ. With genuine respect he says that no less a mind than Hegel was not able to see this point because “the eschatological


36 Ibid., 151.
character of the message of Jesus was beyond him as it was beyond the New Testament interpreters of the time.”

While Troeltsch used the historical method in isolation from the dogmatic method, Pannenberg uses the language of dogmatic method to take hold of history. In “Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation,” Pannenberg claims that while (Thesis 1) “[t]he self-revelation of God... is indirect and brought about by means of the historical acts of God,” (Thesis 2) “[r]evelation is not comprehended completely in the beginning, but at the end of the revealing history.” With the exile, Israel, who had always located God’s saving action in the past, began to look for it in the future; in apocalyptic thought, it would be the very end of history that would decisively reveal the character of God. In contrast to mystery religion, (Thesis 3), “[h]istorical revelation is open to anyone who has eyes to see.” No special religious “faculty” is required; in this context, “faith” is simply the understanding of what one sees in light of God’s promises. If one sees rightly, one can see (Thesis 4) “[t]he universal revelation of the deity of God... in the fate of Jesus of Nazareth, insofar as the end of all events is anticipated in his fate.” Jesus’ resurrection was the historical anticipation of human destiny. This is knowable because (Thesis 5) “[t]he Christ event... is a part of the history of God with Israel.” Jesus’ messianic mission and resurrection takes place within a context of the expectation of a resurrection of the dead at the end of time.38

37 Ibid.

Elsewhere Pannenberg goes further in making history the foundation of faith, saying “Jesus is what he is only in the context of Israel’s expectation. Without the background of this tradition, Jesus would have never have become the object of Christology.”\(^{39}\) In fact, Pannenberg labours to construct a “Christology from below” in which even the concept of Incarnation is derived from an examination of the historical Jesus’ message and fate. Jesus’ claims to authority, which in first century Jewish thinking could only be verified in the *eschaton*, were vindicated in the resurrection. The formation of the early Church and the preaching of Paul were, so far as we know, entirely predicated on the resurrection of Jesus, so that even “an event that is expressible only in the language of the resurrection is to be asserted as a historical occurrence.”\(^{40}\) For Pannenberg, the resurrection can be deemed to be historical through historical research inasmuch as the originally independent traditions of the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances, when taken together and weighed as evidence, suggest a high degree of historical probability, “and that always means in historical inquiry that it is to be presupposed until contrary evidence appears.”\(^{41}\)

Pannenberg answers objections to the resurrection’s historicity based on the inviolability of scientific “laws,” saying that all such laws are contingent, and therefore science cannot declare the impossibility of any individual event. Cornelius A. Buller summarizes this key aspect of Pannenberg’s thought:


\(^{40}\) Ibid., 98.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 105.
Pannenberg argues that during the past one hundred years physics has developed new notions such as (1) events rather than solid bodies constitute the basic principles of the universe, (2) these events are contingent and irreversible, and (3) these events occur within a universal field.... According to Pannenberg, this removes the mechanistic and atheistic premise on which modern philosophical atheism was founded.  

In Pannenberg’s view, says Buller, “[h]istory is not predetermined, but is open to the appearance of new and unexpected realities, which are the creative work of God.”

Pannenberg therefore wants to hold true to his contention that God’s revelation in Jesus is historically accessible, saying that whether or not a particular event happened two thousand years ago is not made certain by faith but rather—and only—by historical research:

As long as historiography does not begin dogmatically with a narrow concept of reality according to which ‘dead men do not rise,’ it is not clear why historiography should not in principle be able to speak about Jesus’ resurrection as the explanation that is best established by such events as the disciples’ experiences of the appearances and the discovery of the empty tomb.

Pannenberg would echo H. Richard Niebuhr’s distinction between history “from the outside” and history “from the inside” by confessing that openness to the historicity of the resurrection would depend on belief in God and trust in God’s promises—“an outlook on reality in general that is not shared by everybody.” In fact, given the secular assumptions of current academic historiography, Christians have to “claim exemption” from a worldview that excludes God, and, therefore, a bodily resurrection. In such a case,

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43 Ibid., 64.

44 Pannenberg, Jesus—God and Man, 109.
a negative judgement on the historicity of Jesus’ bodily resurrection would not be the result of historical criticism, “but a postulate that precedes any such examination.”

Ted Peters concurs with Tilley’s concern to distinguish between historical method and metaphysical assumptions, citing Pannenberg’s critique of Troeltsch: “Pannenberg submits that Troeltsch has gone further than was necessary; he has translated a method of inquiry into a view of reality as a whole.” Analogy always functions from the historian’s own perspective, which is particular, and neither universal nor omniscient. While the principle of analogy is sufficient to ordinary historical observations, an entire metaphysics has to be entered into evidence for the systematic exclusion of the possibility of God communicating another vantage point to us by surprising us from within the fabric of historical events. Peters describes this as the refusal of positive analogy—when an occurrence is held to be the discovery of something like what we have experienced—and, instead, the irrational application of negative analogy—when an occurrence is held to be impossible because it is not identical with what we have experienced. Pannenberg uses the term “metaphor” to indicate the conjoining of two ideas, one familiar to our experience and one strange to our experience. The event of the

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47 In fact, Peters’s point is easily seen without invoking divine causality by creating a fictional scenario wherein civilization collapses and humankind reverts to bronze-age technology for 10,000 years. If a document is discovered ten millennia from now that describes an ancient phenomena called “television,” it would be without analogy in the future historian’s experience—but that would not mean televisions and the television industry never existed. In this case, a strict application of the principle of analogy would lead to a false historical conclusion.
resurrection can be considered “metaphor” inasmuch as “it cannot be fully explained in univocal language. “That,” Peters observes, “does not mean it did not happen.”

For Jürgen Moltmann, the universe and its processes can never be subsumed under the categories of “pure” reason; the world is not a closed system and is therefore in principle never completely reducible to any set of principles. Over against what he disparagingly calls the “theology of epiphany,” where revelation is the temporary lowering of the veil between that which is eternal and unconditioned and that which is temporal and conditioned, Moltmann, like Pannenberg, sees revelation as the decisive opening by God of the future into the present. While Troeltsch and other philosophers of history, according to Moltmann, “depend on the postulate and presupposition of a fundamental similarity underlying all events,” Moltmann objects that in this view

Historic events become understandable only when they are conceived as “manifestations” of this common core of similarity. This, however, is to put an end to their nature as events and to abandon the historic character of history in favour of a metaphysic which sees all historical things in terms of substance.

As a Christian theologian, Moltmann unapologetically claims the history of Israel as reflected in the Hebrew scriptures to be uniquely revelatory of God’s character and purposes with creation. For Moltmann, if Jesus is taken to be the revelation of God, it is non-negotiable for Christian theology that two things be kept before us at all times: first, that “it was Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the promise, who

48 Peters, “Shorter Communications,” 482.

raised Jesus from the dead,” and second, that “Jesus was a Jew.”

The true nature of history, then, should be discernible to the theologian in the relationship of God with Israel. Rather than beginning with abstract starting points of what history is “known” to be and bringing this conceptuality to the reading of scripture, Moltmann’s design is to ascertain the nature of history from the reading of scripture. And for Moltmann, the scriptures, taken as a whole, are essentially eschatological:

The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day. For Christian faith lives from the raising of the crucified Christ. Eschatology is the passionate suffering and passionate longing kindled by the Messiah. Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence and of the whole Church.

This is Moltmann’s motivation for not being entirely satisfied with Pannenberg’s call to reconceive the discipline of history so as to be able to accommodate the “dissimilar and individual, accidental and suddenly new.” Peter Hodgson comments: “Against Pannenberg, [Moltmann] does not believe that the historisch, i.e., the historical-critical, approach to reality can be ‘expanded’ sufficiently to bring the reality of the resurrection

50 Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 141.

51 It is interesting to note that Hans Frei misconstrues Moltmann’s position by grouping him with Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Bultmann, Rahner, and others as holding that the religious meaningfulness of the assertion that Jesus is the Redeemer “could, indeed must, be perspicuous through its relation to other accounts of general human experience.” Hans Frei, The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 128.

52 Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 16.
into view.” However, with Pannenberg, for Moltmann the resurrection is not an analogy of God’s eternal reality to our temporal reality, but the analogy of the reality which is to come to our present reality of living under God’s promise.

Richard Bauckham highlights the distinction Moltmann makes between futurum and adventus, saying that Moltmann’s use of futurum can be understood as the “extrapolation from the past and the present,” while Moltmann’s use of adventus can be understood as that “which is not already contained in the present in potential, and as such it can only be known in anticipation (whether real or verbal) of the future.” Moltmann says, “[o]ur statements spoken out of our present into the divine future are possible on the basis of the divine word spoken into our present out of God’s future.” Moltmann says that “Christ’s death and resurrection are not two happenings belonging to the same category…. Christ’s death on the cross is an historical fact—Christ’s resurrection is an apocalyptic happening.” The resurrection is not a historical event in the sense that the potential for its occurrence was latent in historical process, and it is not “history” in the sense of being a finished, lifeless fact, but the resurrection is the present reality of the future as mediated by the Holy Spirit. The resurrection cannot be defined by history, but


is still an event within history, so that its eschatological nature is able to transform our understanding of history.\(^{57}\)

Moltmann would agree with many postmodern and post-postmodern philosophers of history when he asserts that historical reconstruction and historical interpretation are inextricable from one another. In order to deal with historical texts, the tools of historical criticism must be used whenever “established patterns of life and thought are no longer experienced as self-evident.”\(^{58}\) To properly consider the resurrection of Jesus as an historical event, then, is to already have expanded the historiographic conceptuality (as Pannenberg called for) and to have committed oneself to engage the existential questions it raises (as Bultmann called for). In this way Moltmann speaks of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus as “relatively well-attested historical facts,” while also maintaining that it is “impossible to filter out the substance of these experiences in the form of naked facts detached from their subjective human interpretation. All that would emerge would be unhistorical abstractions.”\(^{59}\) While Moltmann is clear in saying that, for their part, the witnesses to the resurrection “did speak of a fact and an event whose reality lay for them outside their own consciousness and their own faith”—it was, to use other language, objective—the resurrection appearances, having happened for those who lived in messianic expectation, necessarily had messianic implications. There really


is no point for scholars, whether guided by Christian theology or not, in talking about the resurrection except in acknowledgement of its eschatological character, as anticipating the resurrection of the dead at “the end of time.” Far from being apologetic for this interdisciplinary influence of theology on history and historical criticism, Moltmann would claim that it is the task of the theologian to make explicit the otherwise implicit frameworks of interpreters of scripture, and thus guard against the Church disintegrating into so many private readings of the gospel. Moltmann makes his case that historical method is, for the Christian historian, necessarily theological, taking as it does God’s self-revelation in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, resurrected from the dead by an incursion of humanity’s future into humanity’s present, as its central postulate.

Hans Urs von Balthasar contended that any purely *a posteriori* approach to God’s revelation such as Troeltsch commends is pure pretence: “Historical science may attempt to be neutral as regards the philosophy of history, but it cannot controvert the fact that its subject—man in his acts and sufferings—conducts himself, in small things and in great, according to his basic idea of ultimate meaning, that is to say, as a philosopher.” The word of God comes to “the one and only history” of the world not with any neutrality to be adopted and adapted by humankind but as “the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret from eternity.” While all theology is interpretation of divine revelation, “God interprets himself” in what Balthasar calls “Theo-drama.” Ben Quash summarizes

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Balthasar’s principal reasons for understanding history in dramatic terms: “(i) Drama reflects the indeterminacy which typifies human life.... (ii) Drama works through the dynamic staging of ‘particulars’... in a succession of performances through time. (iii) Drama has an irreducibly social dimension to it.... Finally (iv) anticipation plays a vital role in drama.”62 Drama, in Balthasar’s hands, differs from epic, which can find a “neutral” vantage point from which to narrate someone else’s adventure, and from lyric, which is dominated by predictable rhythms. Balthasar’s idea of history is neither simply narrative nor descriptive but thoroughly Theo-dramatic, because in history a God who is “genuinely free to reveal himself unpredictably in the concrete events of the world’s life” does so in a way that “ruptures the familiarity with causal sequences and regularities which is our normal tool in the narration of history.”63

By insisting that the realm of history as we typically understand it is not insulated from God’s activity, Balthasar explicitly repudiated the Troeltschian distinction between historical method and dogmatic method, and the two separate histories this distinction implies. We must avoid, said Balthasar, the situation where the secular scholar and the theologian study the same object “without any encounter or intersection between their two methods.... The refusal of any such agreed demarcation on the part of theology, though it may look like and be called arrogance, is really no more than respect for the

62 Ben Quash, Theology and the Drama of History (Cambridge, MS: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35-37.

63 Ibid., 110.
methodological demands of its subject.””\textsuperscript{64} Rather, the results of the two methods come together to form an aesthetic whole, in which genuine divinity is seen to meet genuine humanity.

Balthasar’s Christology, in contrast with Pannenberg’s, is a Christology “from above,” but not without reference to the “horizontal” dimension of our history. From our theology, we understand Jesus to be unique as fully human and fully divine; from our textual study, we understand Jesus to be unique as the charismatically-marked messiah of Israel. His uniqueness subordinates all modes and categories; he is the standard by which they are measured, and not the other way around: in this respect, Balthasar referred to Jesus as the “concrete universal norm.” In fact, Balthasar plainly stated that “[t]he Son’s action is what history is for.”\textsuperscript{65} If all the world is a stage, it was a stage constructed for this Actor and this Theo-drama. While all history has its own meaning and intelligibility before God, “the history of Israel is unique because it is the pre-history of Christ who is unique. He needs this pre-history to be truly historical.”\textsuperscript{66}

Balthasar also affirmed that the hermeneutical process by which Jesus is interpreted is unique. Balthasar addressed the process of “transposition” in which God’s action is brought to the context of the interpreter’s understanding and affirms the \textit{a priori} presence of the Holy Spirit, who seeks to universalize the Theo-drama. Where faith is absent, Balthasar notes the tendency to concentrate on “the secondary, time-bound


\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Ibid.}, 62.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Ibid.}, 132-133.
elements”; when these are elevated to primary status, they will often be untranslatable and need to be abandoned. Any transpositions are to be judged not on how neatly they fit extrinsic categories, but by how much of their revelatory substance they bring with them. Some transpositions must be done with an eye to standing outside the categories of the interpreter; the virgin birth, for instance, must remain uniquely outside all other categories, simply because it is a unique event in human history. For Balthasar, the lack of analogy in Troeltsch’s sense is no difficulty or embarrassment: sometimes it is what is most carefully to be preserved.67

W.T. Dickens notes that Balthasar “frequently excoriated biblical scholars for assuming that reconstructing what lies ‘behind’ a given biblical text—that is, the socio-political, religious, psychological, or other forces influencing its creation—is the same as understanding it. Balthasar contended that the meaning of the Bible, or any other created form—is shaped, but not exhausted by, the context of its genesis.”68 Concern for “what really happened” must go hand in hand with “what was really intended” by God. In Theodrama, Scripture is not a neutral recording of events from the vantage point of a third party; it is part of the drama. Its “spiritual” sense, while contained in the historical sense, is central. This consideration grounds Balthasar’s seemingly uncritical use of the Gospel of John alongside the synoptics: it is John’s adequacy to its subject matter, namely, the sending of the Son by the Father, which gives it correlative and even interpretive value.


While the order of interpretation for any Scripture should involve initially inquiring into the historical particularity of the text, insofar as this can be determined, this is only to guide the interpreter to the ultimate meaning, which involves both the finite freedom of the human agent and the infinite freedom of God.

While not allowing historical science to constrict theology, Balthasar does grant that it has its own distinct methodology. He upholds Troeltsch’s first axiom, but places it within the context of the theological enterprise: “Histoire is the exact science of history, but its results are always hypothetical; Geschicte is the past as it continues to influence the present, experienced as a living reality. It can and should be examined by Histoire, but ultimately Histoire will not determine its validity.” In understanding the character and mission of Jesus, Balthasar allows for the free interchange of the “exegetical overlay” and the “dogmatic overlay.” Not only is this necessary to bring out the full complementarity of the identity and work of Jesus, but it allows for the ultimate distinction between Balthasar’s theology and the nineteenth century project of theological liberalism, which Troeltsch exemplified. Larry Chapp affirms that Balthasar (like Barth) was responding to the two-step move to deny that historical contingency is a suitable vehicle for eternal, universal truth (cf. Lessing) and identify religious interiority as the only locus of revelation (cf. Schleiermacher). Balthasar eschewed understanding the cross as merely exemplary of eternal truths about God, and instead insisted with Barth that God is revealed in “the real, lived history of a real man,” and that “the Passion is a true drama

where something of soteriological significance is genuinely accomplished.” Balthasar chose instead to lift up the standard of substitutionary atonement, claiming that “those who seek to undermine Anselm’s fundamental intuitions falsify and diminish the mission of Jesus, which thus is bound to become a mere, symbolic illustration of something that is the case anyway....”

Commenting on the element of the Apostles’ Creed, “on the third day he rose again,” Balthasar puts similar stress on the historical when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus:

Establishing that the all-controlling turning point occurred on a prespecified day shows that this turning point was strictly provided for, and also able to be substantiated by witnesses, just like everything that happened in Jesus’ mortal life. The dating here is just as important as that of the Passion under Pontius Pilate. The point in time at which Jesus’ new, deathless life takes its departure from our mortal history is no sometime or other, but a now that can be established for this history, which continues to unfold afterward.

For Balthasar, the historical realm has not, does not, and will not stand in opposition to the atemporal realm: “History is itself the system in Christianity.” Balthasar insists, with Pannenberg, that historical inquiry must be open to the singular; he also insists, with Moltmann, that for the Christian, historical inquiry takes Jesus’ uniqueness as its starting point. He further adds that all historical inquiry is philosophical/theological in nature,


71 Ibid., 241.


whether it explicitly acknowledges this or not, adding that history is not simply revelatory of ultimate meaning but constitutive of it as well.

Appreciating the contributions of these great twentieth century theologians will help us analyze those recent arguments about the resurrection of Jesus presented in the following section.

Historical Reasoning and the Resurrection

Many of those who argue against the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus do so, implicitly or explicitly, based on restatements of Troeltsch’s axioms of historical reasoning. Three interrelated issues emerge from the above discussion that require attention: (1) the issue of historical probability per se, which corresponds to Troeltsch’s principle of criticism; (2) the issue of “laws of nature,” which corresponds to Troeltsch’s principle of analogy; and (3) the issue of *ad hoc* apologetic reasoning, which corresponds to Troeltsch’s principle of correlation.

*Probability and the Principle of Criticism*

As a recent example of the application of the principle of criticism to the resurrection of Jesus, Michael Martin lays out the logical grounds for disbelieving the New Testament witness to the resurrection of Jesus:

1. A miracle claim is initially improbable relative to our background knowledge. 2. If a claim is initially improbable relative to our background knowledge and the evidence for it is not strong, then it should be disbelieved. 3. The resurrection of
Jesus is a miracle claim. 4. The evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus is not strong. 5. Therefore, the Resurrection of Jesus should be disbelieved.\textsuperscript{75}

Martin’s logic holds if we, first, suppose that we live in a universe where divine intervention does occur not in comprehensible fashion; second, that we agree on what we mean by a “miracle,” or at least by “the resurrection”; and third, agree that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is in fact weak. The characterization of evidence as strong or weak, however, presupposes agreement as to where the burden of proof lies.

Sarah Coakley addresses the question of who bears the burden of proof when something extraordinary is claimed to have occurred, the one who makes the claim or the one who seeks to dispute the claim. Coakley discusses David Hume’s treatment of historical method in relation to miraculous claims, citing his classic dictums about always proportioning belief to the evidence and, in the case of miracles, weighing whether or not the falsity of the claim would be “more miraculous” than the claim itself. Coakley concludes that on the one hand “we may not legitimately rule out a violation of [cosmological] law \textit{a priori} but instead use appropriate canons of judgement to evaluate the available evidence,” and on the other hand that… the burden of proof lies very squarely, in the discussion with the \textit{secular} historian or scientist, with the one claiming a violation has taken place.\textsuperscript{76}

Coakley classifies Pannenberg as an “idealist” (as opposed to a “positivist”) for making laws of nature a matter of methodological assumption rather

\textsuperscript{75} Michael Martin, “The Resurrection as Initially Improbable” in Robert M. Price and Jeffrey Jay Lowder (eds.), \textit{The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave} (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 46.

than ontological realities, and in this respect that classification might include, in different ways, Moltmann and Balthasar as well.

Richard Swinburne says that “Hume’s worst mistake was to suppose that the only relevant background theory to be established from wider evidence was a scientific theory about what are the laws of nature.” If there is evidence to support belief in God, specifically the kind of God that might intervene in the natural course of history, this background theory must be factored in when determining the probability of a historical claim that would constitute a supernaturally-caused exception to the posited scheme of the laws of nature. This would level the field, as it were, and, in Swinburne’s view, balance the burden of proof:

So in a clash between historical evidence and background theory where the theory consists of purported laws of nature, on a reasonable understanding of laws of nature, one can hold both that the theory is true and that the historical evidence was correctly reported—either because the very improbable has for once occurred, or because a violation or quasi-violation has occurred. 78

Once it has been accepted that God exists and has sovereignty over the unfolding of natural processes, then the question regarding the resurrection of Jesus becomes whether or not God exercised that sovereignty in this case. Moltmann argued from the novelty of the eschaton to the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, and subordinates the laws of nature to God’s freedom. Balthasar argued that natural processes of this world and the theo-drama of God’s actions within history are necessarily of one piece, though the disciplines of


78 Swinburne, Resurrection, 22.
investigation are distinct, and this has to be the starting point for the mutual informing of the work of the scientist, the historian, and the theologian.

Without establishing specific points of departure, claims for the historicity of the resurrection cannot be simply defeated by appeal to the methodological principle of criticism.

Laws of Nature and the Principle of Analogy

Robert Greg Cavin takes issue with some claims made about “the dispositional properties” of Jesus’ resurrection body—“permanently incapable of death, aging, etc.”—because of the lack of reports of that body passing “genuine tests” of those properties that would serve as evidence in a contemporary discussion. That these tests did not take place, that the guiding concerns of first-century believers (and, perhaps, non-believers) were different from twenty-first century guiding concerns, is a matter of historical record, and, without further testimony forthcoming, a permanent point of disconnection. However, it can be objected that historical method was developed to understand historical events on their own terms, rather than reframe them in ours. Historical method does not contain the assumption that our terms have been determined to be unsurpassable, nor the assumption that it is able to comprehend all of reality. On this point Ted Peters quotes

John Polkinghorne: “Science knows only the matter of this world but it cannot forbid theology to believe that God is capable of bringing about something totally new.”

Richard R. Niebuhr pointed out that all thinkers tend to absolutize the prevailing categories of scientific thought of the time in which they write, but that “all categories or analogies by which the self structures nature are subject to historical change.” With Hume, Whitehead, and others, Niebuhr says, “We recognize, however, that laws of Nature are essentially generalized descriptions of classes of events.” In this sense, the findings of science are abstracted from historical observation. It is certainly the case that observations that run contrary to established systematizations of scientific thought can and should be challenged more vigorously than those that do not, but the course of virtually all scientific, technological, and theoretical advancement has been inspired by and built upon category-challenging observation. One of the difficulties in claiming a historic, rather than a contemporary, exception to generalized scientific observations is that the schema of both specific and generalized observation changes with course of time.

Many claiming allegiance to the Christian faith find the idea that God might step into the historical process and violate the very laws which God established to be abhorrent—but this view contains a form of positivism, which sees laws of nature as

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82 Ibid., 165.
ingredient to reality itself, as opposed to embodying our perception of reality. William Lane Craig, a noted Christian apologist, criticizes Swinburne for relying on the conceptuality of the resurrection being a “violation” of scientific laws, rather than adopting the idealist understanding of scientific method that would ultimately render the notion of a violation of scientific laws incoherent. 83 A further possibility exists between Swinburne’s proximity to dualism and Craig’s embrace of idealism, namely, that the historical evidence for the resurrection could lead one to the admission that our cosmology is incomplete.

Without final determination of our cosmology, claims for the historicity of the resurrection cannot be simply defeated by appeal to the methodological principle of analogy.

Ad Hoc Historical Arguments and the Principle of Correlation

Geza Vermes outlines six possibilities to explain the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus without resorting to divine causality: (1) the body was removed by someone unconnected with Jesus; (2) the body was stolen by his disciples; (3) the empty tomb was not the tomb of Jesus; (4) buried alive, Jesus later left the tomb; (5) Jesus survived crucifixion; (6) the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection were intended to indicate a spiritual, not bodily, resurrection. 84 Vermes opts for the last-mentioned option, only because he finds the first five historically doubtful, and because he methodologically rules out the


inference of divine activity. Certainly many objections to specific, non-supernatural explanatory proposals can be made, critiqued, and even dismissed using the principle of correlation as Troetlsch defined it. In the end, Vermes, by dismissing many unsustainable historical objections, shifts the focus from the nature of the event to the Christian interpretation of the resurrection accounts in the New Testament.

In this regard, Swinburne makes the important point that, in doing history, it is ordinarily the case that “we should believe what others tell us that they have done or perceived—in the absence of counter-evidence.” And Craig is justified in pointing out that, in terms of the historical witness, “[a]n apologetic intention may sometimes tell us why an evangelist includes an incident, not why he invents an incident.” Extraordinary claims, however, such as those usually implicit in claims to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, would require not only a systematic discounting of other explanatory probabilities, but the invocation of a specific conception of God, one that is qualified by some sort of (presumably) self-revealed divine character or purpose. For instance, against the objection that Jesus’ resurrection is less historically probable because he appeared only to his disciples, Swinburne argues that this is indicative of the whole point of the human drama on Earth itself: to enable us “to choose over a significant period of time the kind of people we are to be... and to choose how to influence the kind of other people there are to be... and the kind of world in which...

85 Swinburne, Resurrection, 12-13.

we are to live.” For this purpose, we saw that God must put a certain “epistemic distance” between himself and human beings. In order to avoid multiple accounts of special pleading, it would seem fair, on the face of it, to request that any theological presuppositions that might influence historical investigation into the resurrection of Jesus be named and renamed by historians through the course of their investigations.

From what has been said so far, it should come as no surprise that Troeltsch’s third principle will have to be held loosely by the historian approaching the resurrection in order for the texts’ claims to be heard on their own terms. While the exact nature of the event is still to be considered here, the New Testament appears to present an event in which divine or at least supernatural causality is a factor.

Tilley struggles to pinpoint the dividing line between the work of the historian and the work of the theologian in differentiating between “event” and “action”:

The testimony at the root of the Christian tradition does not claim that an event has occurred, but that God has acted. The resurrection is not merely an event. It is fundamentally, and more significantly, an action. The agent is God. The result is that Jesus is exalted and glorified.... That is of interest, if not to social historians, then to theologians. Historians properly write of human actions and events. They may even attempt to infer what the agents’ intentions were in performing specific acts. But while events are within their scope, acts of God are beyond the pale of properly historical research.

87 Richard Swinburne, *Resurrection*, 172. Swinburne here quotes his own text in chapter two of this work, as something he believes established for the sake of discussion.

Craig implies that while a historian may not be able to consider the nature of an extra-historical cause for a historical event, neither can the historian systematically rule it out.\textsuperscript{89} This pointing beyond naturally knowable history can only be done coherently by the historian who sees the universe as a system open to external influence. Daniel P. Fuller commends Pannenberg for his determination to keep salvation-history within universal history, thereby making all of God’s actions subject to historical investigation. In Pannenberg’s thinking, the meaning of universal history is to be found in the transcendent God, and therefore the meaning of any particular event in history is subject to the overall shape of history, which can be most clearly seen in reference to that which is depicted in the Bible.\textsuperscript{90} The kinds of causes and effects we should look for in the historical process, then, are those that are agreeable with the picture of God as we have in unfolded for us in the scriptures, but they will always have their correlations within the historical process.

Without at least an initial stipulation of the theological options involved, claims for the historicity of the resurrection cannot be simply defeated by appeal to the methodological principle of correlation.

Conclusion

There seems to be no a priori impediment, then, that would bar historians from investigating the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. Christian

\textsuperscript{89} Craig, \textit{Assessing the New Testament Evidence}, 514-515.

theologians should welcome such interest from historians, but never uncritically: the response of theologians to historical research should be related to the assumptions and historical method employed. Christian theologians must also continue to discuss these among themselves, to avoid talking at cross-purposes, and to further clarify the relationship of history and theology.

For example, Tilley appreciates Harvey’s careful account of historiography as a discipline. Tilley, however, has had the benefit of engaging the postmodern critique of historiography, and is consequently far less sanguine about power of rationality to bracket philosophical and theological assumptions. Instead, Tilley questions the power given to Troeltsch’s outline of “the essential aspects” of historical method to invoke a certain worldview. While Tilley seems willing to concede that all purported historical events are subject to historical criticism, he critiques the process of forcing the principles of analogy and correlation from their proper role as analytical tools into necessary descriptors of reality: “I argue that distinguishing procedural presumptions from substantive assumptions unmasks the pretensions of historians to have ‘the last word’... and allows historical work an appropriate place, but not as the final arbiter of truth.”  

First, he observes that few contemporary historians invoke or employ the kind of closed, metaphysical system that, for Troeltsch, warrants the claim that the kinds of events that occurred in the past must correspond with the kind of events that occur in the present. Second, he notes that the “translation” of historical narratives into categories of

experience acceptable to us is not properly within the discipline of the historian. Rather, as Ranke insisted, the historian’s responsibility is to depict a historical event “as it actually happened,” that is, in sympathy with the worldviews of the historical sources; otherwise, the historian becomes a metaphysician or a theologian. And third, citing Carlo Ginzburg, Tilley observes that history is, at least in the majority view, concerned with singular, non-repeatable events, and not with the discernment of laws governing repeatable and quantifiable events. The Troeltschian axioms “are only rules of thumb necessary for engaging in the practice of doing history, descriptions of the common sense of the discipline of history, not philosophical foundations of the practice or metaphysical necessities.”

Since faith-claims are ingredient to the Christian historical claims concerning the resurrection, and all historians work with metaphysical assumptions that function as hermeneutical provisos, it is incumbent on all historians to name their own faith perspectives when sifting data, weighing evidence, and constructing the resulting narrative. In the next chapter we will trace how adjustments to the parameters of historical method made by New Testament scholars affect the results of their work.

Ibid., 43.
CHAPTER FOUR: FOR THE RECORD

It became clear through the survey of secular historians above that doing history is far from a hermetically-sealed discipline. There is no universal agreement among secular historians on the parameters or metaphysical assumptions concerning divine activity in history that would guide inquirers in the historical investigation of miracle-claims or the resurrection of Jesus, and the practice of history seems to be much more of an art than a science. Further, there is no universal agreement among Christian theologians on the specific theological tenets that should guide inquirers, either, though one can trace significant development in the understanding of the relationship of historical method and theology. This set of conditions is readily seen in reading the work of New Testament scholars, the primary practitioners of history when it comes to reading and interpreting the New Testament. In this chapter I examine how various New Testament scholars relate theology to historical method in their practice. I begin with Ernst Käsemann from the mid-twentieth century, as an example a New Testament scholar struggling to be theologically and methodologically self-identified and coherent. I then briefly examine later New Testament scholars, classifying them according to a three-fold typology.

Ernst Käsemann: a Transitional Figure

Ernst Käsemann represents the attempt of many New Testament scholars to balance scepticism about our knowledge of the historical Jesus on the one hand and the
need to interpret the Christian kerygma with continuing reference to the historical Jesus on the other. Käsemann seeks to hold firmly to the advances made by historical and literary scholars such as Bultmann while acknowledging the Barthian critique that severing the kerygma from the historical Jesus leaves us with nothing to centre our theological interpretations of the kerygma.

In “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” Käsemann showed considerable sympathy with the position of Martin Kähler that knowledge of the historical Jesus apart from who he was revealed to be in resurrection is of little importance. Even the historical fact of the empty tomb would be only a historical oddity without the theological affirmation of Jesus’ having been raised by God.¹ For Käsemann, the New Testament does not present any dispassionate portrait of a historical figure: “The historical Jesus meets us in the New Testament, our only real and original documentation of him, not as he was in himself, and not as an isolated individual, but as the Lord of the community which believes in him....”² Paradoxically, while the human life and characteristics of the historical Jesus are almost entirely “swallowed up” by the proclamation of Jesus’ significance, yet the entire New Testament agrees in attributing the manifestation of the kerygma to the historical Jesus. The historical Jesus and the Christ of faith are, in Käsemann’s view, held together consistently and deliberately by the primitive Church

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because of its understanding of the kerygma. However, in presenting Jesus as the object of the kerygma, the Gospels neglect to offer us a convincing portrait of Jesus, for

...as soon as he is portrayed as speaking and acting, this human course becomes an unbroken series of divine revelations and mighty acts, which has no common basis of comparison with any other human life and thus can no longer be comprehended within the category of the historical.\(^3\)

Käsemann accepts most of the judgements of the work of Bultmann and others in peeling back the layers of tradition-formation, a process that leaves little left of which to be certain. Käsemann believes himself to be on solid ground when he says that “We can no longer assume the general reliability of the Synoptic tradition about Jesus,” and “apart from the parables, we possess absolutely no kind of formal criteria by which we can identify the authentic Jesus material.” Käsemann further raises a point of historical method which in fact is ingredient to his central thesis in this essay, that “even Form Criticism leaves us in the lurch” when it comes to positively identifying what elements in the Gospel might be attributed as authentically belonging to Jesus, “for Form Criticism is concerned with the *Sitz-im-Leben* of narrative forms and not with what we may call historical individuality.”\(^4\) Although he is familiar with and helps to clarify other criteria of authenticity, such as multiple attestation, coherence, and historical probability, here he says, “[i]n only one case do we have more or less safe ground under our feet; when there are no grounds either for deriving a tradition from Judaism or for ascribing it to primitive Christianity, and especially when Jewish Christianity has mitigated or modified received

\(^3\) Ibid., 30.

\(^4\) Ibid., 34-35.
tradition, as having found it too bold for its taste.” This calling something “too bold” for the taste of first century Jewish Christianity is exemplified in Käsemann’s ascription of authenticity to sections of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:1 - 7:28).

The determining factor, however, is that the words ἑγάδελγω embody a claim to an authority which rivals and challenges that of Moses. But anyone who claims an authority rivalling and challenging Moses has ipso facto set himself above Moses; he has ceased to be a rabbi, for a rabbi’s authority only comes to him derived from Moses.... To this there are no Jewish parallels, nor indeed can there be. For the Jew who does what is done here has cut himself off from the community of Judaism—or else he brings the Messianic Torah and is therefore the Messiah.

It is intriguing to note, however, that while Käsemann asserts that “it was the belief of Jesus that, in his word, the basileia was coming to his hearers,” he goes on to say that “there can be no possible grounds” for asserting that Jesus understood himself to be the Messiah. While he ultimately rejects Bultmann’s finding that the self-designation as “Son of Man” is based on a mistranslation from Aramaic, Käsemann believes that the picture of messiahship in the Gospels is too close to the kerygma and not close enough to Jewish expectations to be considered historical. Lacking even a rudimentary sense of Jesus’ self-understanding, Käsemann says, we do not have even “some central points” around which to reconstruct a life-of-Jesus.

5 Ibid., 37.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 43.
8 Ibid., 45.
In “Is the Gospel Objective?” Käsemann says that in regards to miracles, “the battle is over, not perhaps as yet in the arena of church life, but certainly in the field of theological science. It has ended in the defeat of the concept of miracle which has been traditional in the Church.” This defeat is primarily because “miracle in general was offensive to the world view of the modern age and the concept of nature and causality which was bound up with it,” and only secondarily because of the recognition of the highly stylized way in which miracles in the Gospels are reported, and “countless” parallels in ancient lore. In the Gospels, miracles are not conceived as violations of nature, however, but as epiphanies of the power and presence of God: “It was not historical but kerygmatic interest which handed them on. From this standpoint it becomes comprehensible that this tradition, or at least the overwhelming mass of it, cannot be called authentic.”

Conscious of the need for humility invoked by Schweitzer half a century earlier, however, Käsemann concedes that

[the representations of the New Testament scholars are dependent on their premises and the logic of their methodology.... [However,] there are no grounds for lapsing into a defeatist scepticism; there are at least some things about which we can have the maximum possible certainty and which free us from the necessity of judging the faith of the community to be arbitrary and meaningless. But this kind of knowledge prevents the Christian message from dissolving into myth.]

Käsemann’s attempt to stake out a middle ground on the relationship of the historical Jesus to the kerygma is instructive in three ways.

9 Ibid., 49.
10 Ibid., 59.
11 Ibid., 64.
First, though he is aware of the relationship of “premises... and methodology” to “representations,” Käsemann unapologetically invokes modern cosmology in rejecting the possibility of miracle stories being authentically attributable to the ministry of the historical Jesus. While he is careful to identify the first century conceptuality that made miracle-claims historically comprehensible to first-century readers, and adds the insight that they were, from the standpoint of the Gospel writer’s redactions, theologically necessary, he accepts the normative force of twentieth century cosmology for twentieth-century historians in rejecting the ontological reality of purported miracles.

In doing so he adds the results of form criticism as further justification for this rejection. It is certainly true that narrative form may indicate to us whether or not a narrative is to be regarded as fictional, as opposed to factual; if we found a narrative that began with the words “Once upon a time,” or even “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...” we would have form-critical grounds to suppose, in the first place, that the narrative was fictional, because of the contrast of this form with factual accounts. In the case of first century miracle stories, however, there can be no contrasting forms for factual accounts, since the factuality of miracles has already been excluded by the twentieth-century form-critic. The rejection of miracle stories from historical consideration is not, in this case, the result of application of historical method but rather the employment by Käsemann of certain metaphysical assumptions. While Käsemann might have been cognisant of naturalistic and deterministic arguments of his day, the assimilation of quantum physics on the one hand and the emergence of structuralism on the other is reflected in the later World Council of Churches’ document “God in Nature
and History,” which viewed this as a problem largely resolved for future generations of scholars: “Deeper study of the Bible, as well as modern science, has removed the problem in this form. Both consider the natural order as not a closed but an open reality.”

This consideration points to the nature of history as a discipline in which the view constantly shifts from the parts to the larger whole and back again, from evidence to theoretical framework back to evidence, in a dialogue where both framework and evidence are free to challenge each the other.

Second, in rejecting purported messianic claims made by the historical Jesus, Käsemann acknowledges Jesus’ assumption of supra-Mosaic authority over the Law; in fact, this for Käsemann is as close as we come to ascertaining who the historical Jesus is, because this authority is dissimilar to both first-century rabbinical Judaism and to the concerns of the (increasingly Gentile) first century Church. This raises the question of why a supra-Mosaic messianic claim on the part of Jesus, dissimilar as it was from both first century Jewish messianic expectations and the concerns of the (increasingly Gentile) first century Church, does not equally meet Käsemann’s criterion of double dissimilarity.

It could be that this unique messianic claim does not cohere with other elements of his understanding of the historical Jesus—but according to Käsemann, there is little else other than Jesus’ claim to supra-Mosaic authority that is as historically reliable. Käsemann’s principle reason for rejecting any messianic claims by the historical Jesus seems to be ultimately rooted in what he considers to be the incredible Markan portrayal

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of the disciples’ incomprehension of Jesus’ messianic claims. However, if it was possible that the historical Jesus gathered a community of followers while claiming authority that superseded that of Moses and without claiming to be the Messiah, the need of the first century Church to invent such a claim would need to be detailed. Further, because it is an inference made without direct evidence, it would need to be argued that this is more credible than Mark’s portrayal of limited claims to messiahship and disciples with wavering loyalties. Ben Meyer believes “the purely messianic sense presents itself as the link between pre-Christian tradition… and a full-blown Christology of the post-paschal Church.”¹³ This consideration points to the hypothetical nature of doing history: history is not about deduction from inarguable first principles or bare facts that divulge their own significance, but rather about constructing and supporting satisfactory hypotheses.

Third, Käsemann calls his reader to make the most of the “pitiful threads” of history that we have, but not with “uncontrolled imagination,” lest we fall into Docetism: “The preaching of the Church may be carried on anonymously; the important thing is not the person, but the message. But the Gospel itself cannot be anonymous, otherwise it leads to moralism and mysticism.”¹⁴ Here Käsemann, as a Christian New Testament scholar, has traded hats—or turned his hat around—to make an appeal as a theologian. He begins by calling for the appreciation of what the early Church did in appropriating what it knew of the historical Jesus and his message into the kerygma, and then assumes


¹⁴ Käsemann, Essays, 45-46.
that this same procedure is incumbent on twentieth-century readers. Given the occasion of these particular remarks, a reunion of theological students, this appeal is perfectly in order, but it illustrates that it is nearly impossible to account for why one is doing history in relation to the New Testament if there is no operative theological agenda.

Käsemann doubtless would have agreed with this observation, but he would still have to account for his theological deprecation of moralism and mysticism. N.T. Wright opines that

Käsemann, aware (as in all his work) of the dangers of idealism and docetism, insisted that if Jesus were not earthed in history then he might be pulled in any direction, might be made the hero of any theological or political programme. Käsemann had in mind, undoubtedly, the various Nazi theologies which had been able, in the absence of serious Jesus-study in pre-war Germany, to construct a largely unJewish Jesus. Without knowing who it was who died on the cross, he said, there would be no solid ground for upholding the gospel of the cross in all its sharpness, which saw as especially needed in post-war Germany. However, this very definite theological agenda, for all its worth (which would scarcely be questioned today), meant that the New Quest, ironically enough, did not represent a turning to history in the fullest sense.”

This consideration points to the ultimately theological nature of history, that is, that all history is done with an acknowledged or unacknowledged view, in McIntire’s terms, of the “ultimate” dimension of history. Since the New Testament is a collection of documents explicitly testifying to what its authors consider to be ultimate, this is especially true in the case of the historical study of the New Testament. That being said, New Testament scholars hold varying theological commitments and employ varying strategies to relate—or separate—theology and historical method, as we will see in the following section.

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Recent New Testament Scholarship

A brief look at a number of recent New Testament scholars will reveal the pertinence of the same concerns and questions as in the above discussion of Käsemann. Each of these scholars have undertaken significant historical treatment of the resurrection of Jesus—or, where they have not, the omission is itself significant. For purposes of comparison I will place them in three groups based on how they appear to understand the relationship between history and religious faith. In the class of those whose approach could be construed as insulating religious faith from historical research, I will discuss the work of William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, Phoeme Perkins, and Pinchas Lapide. In the class of those whose approach could be construed as critiquing religious faith with historical research, I will discuss the work of Dominic John Crossan, Gerd Lüdemann, Willi Marxsen, and Jill Levine. In the class of those whose approach could be construed as integrating religious faith with historical research, I will discuss the work of N.T. Wright, John P. Meier, Marcus Borg, and Udo Schnelle.

**Insulating Religious Faith from Historical Research: Craig, Habermas, Perkins, and Lapide**

Some recent New Testament scholars seek to insulate religious faith from historical research by denying the relevance of theology to historical method and of historical method to theology.

William Lane Craig represents a model of historiography that attempts to insulate religious faith from historical research by attempting to demonstrate the historical
credibility of the resurrection of Jesus without reference to theology. Craig laments the waning of the evidentialist argument for the resurrection of Jesus that attempted to place the Gospels on even footing with secular historiography, which “was supplanted in the nineteenth century by an inwardly-oriented apologetic through the advance in biblical criticism and the tide of subjectivism which swept Europe....”

Craig reconstructs how a historical argument for the resurrection might look today: (1) setting aside historical scepticism (2) defending the possibility of miracles; (3) weighing the evidence of the empty tomb, the appearances of the risen Jesus, and the origin of the Christian Way (including dissimilarity with Judaism).

Fleshing out some of the elements of that argument, Craig complains that the Gospel accounts of the resurrection are treated unfairly and discounted as potential evidence in an argument for the historicity of the resurrection. However, he does so without allowing for the fact that the resurrection narratives in themselves constitute various arguments, with apologetic overtones, for the reality of the resurrection in various dimensions. He cites Moltmann as an ally who decries the process whereby “the understanding of the resurrection narratives as no longer statements ‘about something’ but as ‘expressions of’ personal and corporate faith.” However, it seems that Craig does not fully understand Moltmann, for in the same context in which Craig cites him, Moltmann goes on to assert that “[t]he modern alternative, reading them either as

16 William Lane Craig, The Historical Argument, 475.

17 Ibid., 544-546.

18 Ibid., 164.
historical sources or as kerygmatic calls to decision, is foreign to them.”19 Moltmann
never suggests that the resurrection narratives can be read other than eschatologically,
which is a position very far from Craig’s evidentialist approach. Craig also cites A.N.
Sherwin-White to the effect that “the external confirmation of the gospels is of such a
degree that their trustworthiness ought to be accepted even in cases where specific
confirmation is lacking.”20 However, the fact that the resurrection appearances are only to
believers (or, in the case of Paul, one who become a believer), and are not public events,
legitimately raises the question of whether in the case of these appearances we are
dealing with the same order of event as with those of Jesus’ public ministry, and if the
Gospel writers themselves were aware of the difference. At any rate, Craig’s intentions
are clear:

Theological conceptions of what is ‘appropriate’ to Jesus’s person and work
cannot dictate to history what must have happened; rather theological conceptions
may have to be changed in light of history. The only valid grounds for accepting
or rejecting Jesus’s predictions as historical must be empirical.21

Craig’s conclusion on this matter is this: “In fact, I would go so far as to say that there is
not a single event in the resurrection narratives that is not in principle historically
verifiable or falsifiable.”22

19 Ibid., 165, fn. 4, citing Jurgen Möltmann, Theology of Hope (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press,
1993), 187.

20 Ibid., 166-167.

21 Ibid., 215.

22 Ibid., 419.
As has already been noted, Craig asks the historian to be open-minded toward the possibility of miracles, wherein a cause outside of history effects an event within history. This is a theologically-motivated necessity for Craig: as a Christian, Craig has no interest in either Jesus’ surviving crucifixion or, as in Cavin’s alternative, Jesus’ being revivified. For Craig, as for many others, Jesus’ appearances would be a historical oddity without religious significance if divine causality were not inferable. Craig’s empiricism borders on positivism, and lacks the sophistication of either Swinburne’s or Pannenberg’s acknowledgement that another “background theory,” namely biblical theism, must be introduced at this point. Craig insulates religious faith from historical method by failing to acknowledge the theological dimension of the resurrection as a historical claim.

Gary R. Habermas also attempts to make a historical case for the resurrection that is free of theological argument. Habermas’s principal historiographic strategy is to attempt to minimize the influence of his own subjectivity and maximize the probability of his arguments by enlisting the greatest possible number of ancient testimonies and references to the existence and resurrection of Jesus. While he is willing to concede the


subjectivity of the modern historian in reading the Gospels, Habermas does not apply the same criticism to the writers of the Gospels, showing no knowledge of source or redaction criticism, and making no argument for or about their reliability as historical sources. Habermas nowhere deals with the possibility that the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb are pious fictions meant to metaphorize the early Christian experience that Jesus was alive, and he quotes 1 John, Philippians, and 2 Timothy in the same context without differentiating between them as to their authorship, time of writing, or strand of tradition represented.\textsuperscript{26}

Habermas treats his data in a manner that could be characterized as \textit{historically empiricist}, in which ancient sources are treated as brute facts, which themselves make the case for the historicity of the resurrection. Like Craig, in calling for an open mind in regard to miraculous events such as the resurrection, Habermas does not sufficiently account for the \textit{necessity} of the historian possessing a worldview which is inclusive of some possibilities and exclusive of others. It is painfully obvious, however, that Habermas’ selection and organization of data—especially when it comes to buttressing his arguments with scholarly opinion—is guided by familiar theological assumptions, including the infallibility and consequent historical reliability of scripture. And while Habermas attempts to exclude theological considerations from his arguments in building a case for the resurrection of Jesus, he declares it to be an event without \textit{natural} analogy, thereby requiring divine causation for his argument to reach its conclusion. Habermas’

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, 120.
“historical” argument insulates religious faith from historical investigation by almost completely ignoring historical method.

Pheme Perkins is not interested in treating the gospel accounts as historical narratives, but rather as the key to the theological declarations of the first-century Christians.27 These declarations are to be translated into contemporary terms by various means with a minimum of distortion and yet a maximum of relevance. While she does not explicitly identify her method, I read Perkins as working largely in a structuralist mode, acknowledging the difficulties involved in trying “to recover a way into the reality of that earlier world of discourse.”28 She bemoans the “loss of resurrection as an effective symbol,” saying that it is a symptom of the fact that “we live out of a three-way conflict between the facticity of our everyday language, the conceptual language of the metaphysical tradition that gave shape to most Christian systematization of belief, and the language of metaphoric consciousness in which the Bible operates.”29 Perkins adopts as her starting points a series of theological claims from Hans Küng:

1. Resurrection cannot be described as a historical event in the ordinary sense of the word.... 2. Speaking of resurrection as an ‘eschatological event’ distinguished it from miraculous intervention in the natural order, such as the revival of a corpse or a near-death experience. It also implies that resurrection is an event for Jesus, not merely a change of awareness on the part of the disciples.... 3. The variety of traditions and types of witnesses make it impossible to reduce resurrection to the projection of the disciples’ need to recover the ‘heady intimacy’ of their


28 Ibid., 24.

29 Ibid., 320.
fellowship with Jesus.... 4. Finally, ‘eschatological event’ implies that the ‘bodily’ reality involved is discontinuous with the material reality we experience.\textsuperscript{30}

Perkins does not say that the New Testament texts are without historical referents, but she is extremely cautious when it comes to historical reconstruction of the resurrection event; for instance, she offers the opinion that “the combination of an early tradition of appearances of the Lord and the conviction that Jesus’ tomb was empty would help to explain the significance of the resurrection in the Christian message about Jesus.”\textsuperscript{31} She admits that the New Testament narratives of the empty tomb show “little elaboration of miraculous detail” in comparison with later apocryphal stories, but in the end “the gospels tell us much less about the historical events surrounding the resurrection than they do about the legacy of faith in Jesus as the risen One that has shaped the traditions that have come down to us.”\textsuperscript{32} While affirming that Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ resurrection—and hence ours—was definitely bodily, though of a different order, and maintaining the independence of the resurrection and exaltation traditions within the New Testament, Perkins does not here deal with the historical question of how Jesus’ resurrection came to be thought of as bodily. Ultimately, I believe that Perkins assumes a kind of Rahnerian transcendentalism, in which the great resurrection themes of the transcendence of death, the triumph of good over evil, and the liberation of humanity are


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 84.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 94, 115.
sufficient for faith without the historical credibility of the resurrection event.\textsuperscript{33} Perkins insulates religious faith from history not by making faith rest on a foundation of history, but by making history largely irrelevant to faith.

Pinchas Lapide claims that otherwise-plausible objections to the resurrection are limited in that “they attempt to understand ‘reality’ in a restricted way, exclusively as a physically comprehensible or rationally understandable facticity—a standard which is hostile to all human faith.”\textsuperscript{34} This lack of empathy with the \textit{historical} reality that all the witnesses to the resurrection were “sons and daughters of Israel” prevents the historian from appreciating the developing tradition of belief in the resurrection of the dead in Jewish circles, grounded in the love and power of God, which enabled the first disciples to believe not merely that Jesus \textit{happened} to be raised from the dead but \textit{must} have been raised from the dead, because he was the Messiah. For the modern historian, the historical nature of the resurrection is confirmed principally by use of the criterion of embarrassment: that it was asserted that women were the first witnesses, that no one was reported to have been brought to faith by the empty tomb, and that Jesus only appeared to those familiar with him and believing in him. If the resurrection accounts were fiction, the writers would have written the story differently for first-century Jews: “Despite all the literary embellishments, in the oldest records there remains a recognizable historical

\textsuperscript{33} Conway, Pádraic and Ryan, Fáinche, eds., \textit{Karl Rahner, Theologian for the Twenty-first Century} (New York: Peter Lange, 2010).

kernel which cannot simply be demythologized.”\textsuperscript{35} Lapide asserts that the hypothesis of a bodily resurrection of Jesus caused by divine agency is in fact the best historical hypothesis by which to explain the data.

As a believing Jew, Lapide feels free to assert that “the resurrection belongs to the category of the truly real and effective occurrences, for without a fact of history, there is no act of faith.”\textsuperscript{36} However, Lapide does not feel compelled to share the Christian interpretation of Jesus’ resurrection. He conjectures that God has raised up Jesus in order to give birth to Christianity, “to carry the message of Sinai into the world…. Jesus, therefore, without doubt, belongs to the praeparatio messianic of the full salvation which is still in the future.”\textsuperscript{37} Lapide accepts “neither the messiahship of Jesus for the people of Israel nor the Pauline interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{38} Instead, Lapide brings into service the form-critical criterion of “least distinctiveness” within a broader history-of-religions approach, emphasizing the ever-expanding “secondary elaboration” of the resurrection narratives in the historical progression from Paul through Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John: “The later the report, the more is to be narrated; the further the distance from the event itself, the more colourful is the description.”\textsuperscript{39} This is an important step for Lapide, because it enables him to place the actual resurrection of Jesus in the same

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 125.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 92.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 152-153.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 39.
genre of occurrence with Elijah’s raising of the widow’s son at Nain, and discount those elements in the Gospel accounts that would support the claim that Jesus’ resurrection was unique. In so doing, Lapide insulates his own religious faith from historical research by excluding the data from the Gospels—the earthquake, the angelic appearances, the bodily ascension of Jesus—which, by their uniqueness, would call the former into question if deemed to be historical.

Craig, Habermas, Perkins, and Lapide have three things in common. First, each of them believes that the resurrection was an historical event of some kind. While they all employ multiple attestation as a criterion of authenticity, they do so in a naïve fashion: none of them engage in source criticism—only Perkins mentions Q, and that once, in passing. As for the criterion of dissimilarity, only Lapide reinforces the credibility of his argument with one of its subspecies, namely the criterion of embarrassment. And as for the criterion of coherence, Craig and Habermas assume that the reports of the canonical Gospels represent the core of the tradition, and other witnesses are enlisted as consistent with them, but this is not done in the vein of historical reconstruction: in fact, of the three, only Lapide genuinely engages in historical-critical reconstruction. Second, each of them works with the assumption that faith is necessary to the understanding of the resurrection. Craig and Habermas do this implicitly, and Perkins and Lapide do this explicitly. Craig effectively modifies Troeltsch’s principle of analogy, while Habermas rejects it outright, and Lapide does so in practice. Craig, Habermas and Lapide respect Troeltsch’s principle of correlation, so long as God is considered a cosmic agent. All four of these scholars acknowledge Troeltsch’s principle of criticism – that historical research can, at the best,
provide probabilities – though Craig and Habermas both affirm and deny it, depending on context. Third, none of them is explicit about their historical method. While Perkins works largely within a structuralist framework, Craig and Habermas work inconsistently within a naïve empiricist framework, and Lapide works within a self-conscious perspectivalist framework, but none of them presents detailed arguments for their selection of data or the framing of their hypotheses.

In some important respects, these authors leave unanswered those questions raised by the original nineteenth century Quest for the historical Jesus: none of them identify what they would consider to be the essential elements of a depiction of the historical Jesus; none of them clearly defines the relationship of history to faith, although Lapide at least invokes and works with it; and none of them declares what the relationship of the historical Jesus ought to be to the Christology of the Church—Craig and Habermas reject the distinction, Lapide rejects the assignment, and Perkins, it seems, resists the temptation to cross academic departmental boundaries.

*Critiquing Religious Faith With Historical Research: Crossan, Lüdemann, Marxsen, and Levine*

Some recent New Testament scholars use historical investigations to refute certain theological positions, giving the former epistemological priority over the latter.

John Dominic Crossan represents a model of historiography that effectively critiques religious faith with historical research, by attempting to identify the earliest forms of Christian faith in the hope that such a reconstruction will be taken as normative
for Christian faith. Crossan identifies his method as involving the interplay of the 
*macrocosmic* level of social anthropology, the *mesocosmic* level of Greco-Roman 
history, and the *microcosmic* level of selected literary sources. Crossan aligns himself 
with D.F. Straus and Bultmann in being explicitly committed to a framework of stages in 
the development of the Christian tradition, including one of retention recording at least the essential core of words and deeds, events 
and happenings; another of development, applying such data to new situations, 
novel problems, and unforeseen circumstances; and a final one of creation, not 
only composing new sayings and new stories, but, above all, composing larger 
complexes that changed their contents by that very process.

Crossan contends that “the continuing presence of the Spirit gave the transmitters a 
creative freedom we would never have dared postulate were it not forced upon us by the 
evidence…. The Gospels are neither histories nor biographies, even within the ancient 
tolerance of those genres.”

Therefore, for the purposes of historical reconstruction, Crossan begins with a small catalogue of complexes of structurally, thematically, and 
imaginatively similar material that he believes have been established through source and 
form criticism as “authentic” sources for information about the historical Jesus. These 
complexes consist primarily of Q material, the Gospel of Thomas, the Didache, and “The 
Cross Gospel” (which is Crossan’s reconstruction of a pre-Markan text underlying the 
later apocryphal Gospel of Peter). Crossan prioritizes these complexes according to (1) 
their proximity to the dates of Jesus’ ministry and (2) their number of independent 

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40 John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: the life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: 

attestations. From a perusal of the “authentic” material, Crossan discerns principal themes which would make Jesus’ ministry distinctive and yet intelligible given the oppressive social structures in first-century Galilee, namely, that Jesus’ healings (which Crossan takes to be historical) were done neither for profit nor prestige, and that Jesus’ table-fellowship was notoriously egalitarian: “The intersection of magic and meal, miracle and table is pointed directly and deliberately at the intersection of patronage and clientele, honor and shame, the very heart of Mediterranean society.”

Given Crossan’s circumscription of historical sources, and his view of the “creativity” of the canonical Gospels, it is hardly surprising that he arrives at a highly non-traditional picture of the historical Jesus: “We are forced then, by the primary stratum itself, to bring together two disparate elements: healer and Cynic, magic and meal. The historical Jesus was, then, a peasant Jewish Cynic.” This largely Greco-Roman, non-apocalyptic Jesus was arrested and crucified for disturbing the peace in the Temple in a moment of “egalitarian rage.” As for the invented Markan tradition of Jesus’ betrayal, trials, nobility in crucifixion, and burial by Joseph of Arimathea, Crossan remarks that “all of these industrious redactions set out to solve one simple problem. Nobody knew what had happened to Jesus’ body.... Why should even the soldiers themselves remember the death and disposal of a nobody?” While Crossan’s thesis may seem to trivialize Jesus and his ministry, that is precisely the point: Jesus was the nobody

42 Ibid., 304.
43 Ibid., 421.
44 Ibid., 394.
who proved that nobodies are somebodies. In fact, it is the nobodies who make Jesus a Somebody: “If those who accepted Jesus during his earthly life had not continued to follow, believe, and experience his continuing presence after the crucifixion, all would have been over. That is the resurrection, the continuing presence in a continuing community of the past Jesus in a radically new and transcendental mode of present and future existence.”45

Crossan is laudably interdisciplinary, but his determination of early, authentic material is done almost entirely by means of source criticism, with little reference to the broader historical picture until after this determination is complete. Crossan clearly seeks to establish a historical method that begins with literary criticism in near-isolation, such that a historian would be “forced, by the primary stratum itself,” to adopt an alternative understanding of the resurrection that would have the force of critiquing Christian tradition. This would reveal a Jesus who was not a semi-divine heroic figure, allowing him to claim to “find, therefore, no contradiction between the historical Jesus and the defined Christ.” Crossan’s work here is problematic on two grounds. First, the dating of the documents that Crossan accepts as principal sources, including the Gospel of Thomas and his own reconstruction of “The Cross Gospel,” is not accepted by many other scholars, but is necessary to his arguments.46 Second, the identification of literally prior with historically prior material, and historically prior material with most authentic, is, in

45 Ibid., 404.

this case, without corroboration, and ignores the viability of oral tradition. Crossan’s portrait of Jesus, including Jesus’ fate, is not a simple matter of deduction from established facts. There is a fundamental circularity of Crossan’s dating of materials and his portrait of the development of the Christian tradition: they are, in fact, not independently-established and mutually-supporting elements, but part of the same single unnamed hypothesis.  

Gerd Lüdemann defends the project of making the debate regarding the resurrection of Jesus “public,” by which he means available to the historian who is not theologically-committed. Even if we have no eyewitnesses to the event described by the evangelists, he says, we have Paul’s testimony; even if the historical sources are incomplete, or invite theological questions, or involve faith-claims, or suffer from the intertwining of event and interpretation, these are no excuses for refusing to “present a hypothesis on the ‘resurrection’ of Jesus which causes the least offence and solves the most difficulties….”  

Lüdemann’s procedure is similar but not identical to Crossan’s. He first examines the texts from a form-critical standpoint, to ascertain what texts are credible enough to bear further examination. He then analyzes all the relevant texts using, in order, redaction criticism, tradition criticism, and historical criticism. He then takes the results of these investigations and reconstructs “the history and the nature of the earliest

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47 Ibid., 424.

Christian belief in the resurrection,” promising to raise the question of “whether in view of the evidence we can still call ourselves Christians.”

Early in his inquiry, Lüdemann takes up D. F. Strauss’ position that Paul, in his list of the appearances of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15, assumed that the appearances to Peter, James, and the others were of the same nature as the appearance to himself. In Lüdemann’s estimation, since Paul’s record of his experience is the earliest record of the appearance-tradition, dating back to within three years of Jesus’ death, this relativizes the historicity of the narrative elements in the Gospels regarding the empty tomb to Paul’s description of his encounter with the risen Jesus. This, combined with Paul’s failure to mention the empty tomb, and his affirmation that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,” restricts the earliest Christian tradition regarding the resurrection to visionary appearances of Jesus. In this framework, Lüdemann considers the appearance to the 500 to be a historical case of mass hysteria, and the visit of Mary Magdalene to the tomb is considered to be “an apologetic legend.” This logic is applied to the other Gospel traditions, with the exception of some visionary-like qualities embedded in the Johannine narratives. The “earliest Christian belief in the resurrection,” then, was “that God had taken [Jesus] to himself or exalted him,… which was unexpected after Jesus’ death on the cross.” Lüdemann chalks up resistance to what he calls “the visionary hypothesis” to

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49 Ibid., 19.
50 Ibid., 30.
51 Ibid., 176.
“an inability to perceive Paul’s piety or his religious life as it was.”52 By using what he considers to be the earliest attestation to the resurrection of Jesus to be definitive for all experiences of the resurrection, Lüdemann confines the historicity of the resurrection to appearances of a certain kind, and critiques certain forms of religious faith by ruling all historical investigation of any claims to a bodily resurrection as depicted in the Gospels to be therefore moot.

Willi Marxsen takes a slightly different route to the same destination as Crossan and Lüdemann. Marxsen wants to hold out that while “the resurrection of a dead person is, according to our experience, impossible…. it is nonetheless inadmissible to make our (inevitably limited) experience the yardstick for what once happened and for the way it happened.”53 Instead of sequestering those elements of New Testament that represent early and authentic tradition and considering them in isolation from later tradition, Marxsen attempts to read the major elements of the New Testament in their literary integrity. In reading the Gospels, however, Marxsen finds not only contradictions among them, but internal to each of them as well, and concludes that in each Gospel, “the story cannot in any case have actually taken place as it stands.”54 Taken altogether, however, the cumulative effect of the Gospels yields this synopsis:

If one does not separate the end from the beginning—if, that is to say, one really sees each work as a whole—one can see that all the evangelists want to show that

52 Ibid., 69.
54 Ibid., 47.
the activity of Jesus goes on. It goes on in spite of his death on the cross; and it remains the activity of the same Jesus who was once active on earth.\textsuperscript{55}

By this Marxsen metaphorizes Jesus’ post-mortem existence; the activity of proclaiming and healing on the part of the disciples is the totality of Jesus’ resurrection. Marxsen is then consistent to metaphorize the resurrection appearances of Jesus: “Simon was the first to believe; the reason for his having believed is expressed by saying that Simon saw Jesus.”\textsuperscript{56} Here Marxsen speaks the language of the first group of scholars discussed, as if to insulate religious faith from history, saying that the historian who declares for or against the historicity of the resurrection has “exceeded the bounds of his potentialities.”\textsuperscript{57} While it appears that Marxsen is suggesting that the historian can say nothing about the objectivity of the resurrection because of the nature of the sources, it is important to note that Marxsen says this precisely because he has metaphorized the resurrection of Jesus into the ongoing activities of the Christian community; because the resurrection is the paradigm of novelty, the fidelity of the Christian community to the purposes of Jesus’ ministry becomes an ethical rather than a historical question. In the end, Marxsen clearly calls for a reconceptualization of the resurrection as reception of the message that “God can do anything…. And that is far more than the idea of the resurrection of the dead could ever express,”\textsuperscript{58} and he does so based on his employment and prioritizing of his avowedly theologically-neutral historical method. As with

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 188.
Lüdemann, while Marxsen seeks to be consistent with the message of the New Testament, he stands in critique of its traditional interpretation.

Amy-Jill Levine takes the hermeneutics of Crossan, Lüdemann, and Marxsen one step further. Rather than isolate those texts which can be considered authentic, or prioritize texts according to their approximate dating, or look beyond their historical contradictions to their historical core message, Levine asks what relevance the texts of the New Testament have to doing history. Levine declares that “Bad history cannot lead to good theology,”⁵⁹ by which she means that if twenty-first century historians or theologians import our own assumptions of social or political reality into our reading of the New Testament, even in the name of battling racism or sexism, we make comprehension of the text impossible. Levine further cautions readers of the New Testament, and readers of all ancient texts, that what appears on first reading to be a historical narrative may not be historical at all, at least in our modern sense: it may be that “either the authors are presenting the way they presume things once were; or they are depicting present social circumstances masked by a fictional setting; or they are prescribing, through an appeal to the legitimation provided by time and tradition, the way they think people ought to behave.”⁶⁰ Levine also doubts that too much can be made of

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grand theories of literary dependencies: though she has published on Q,\(^61\) she is not enamoured of the traditional two- or four-source solution to “the synoptic problem,” and even less of detailed inferences drawn from form-criticism left unsupported by historical inquiry. Levine points out the problematic relationship between form-criticism and historical inquiry when she asks,

Was the *Sitz im Leben* to be understood by the analysis of the forms, or were the forms to be understood on the basis on an anterior setting in life? … Whereas an existential relationship with the text, as Rudolf Bultmann promulgated, held some attraction, the appeal of history had not gone away.\(^62\)

History may not have lost its appeal but, according to Levine’s standards, history may be lost to us. Levine dismisses the inviolability of the criteria for authenticity as outlined by Käsemann: we are not sure enough of the provenance of our sources to use multiple attestation; our sources—even within the New Testament—are too varied to allow us to judge anything “dissimilar” with an established view; and we lack enough information on first century Palestine to effectively use coherence as a criterion.\(^63\) This scepticism regarding the usefulness of historical-critical methodology on ancient texts, combined with a Troetlschian rejection of the admissibility of the miraculous within historical method,\(^64\) leaves Levine with a high regard for the literary and theological


qualities of the Gospels, but with no confidence in their reference to first century events. Under such conditions, “Historians and social scientists can learn from literary critics, feminists, and postcolonial readers that their [own] arguments are necessarily subjective and incomplete; they are no less motivated by subjective positions or conditioned by ideological presuppositions.” 65 Though Levine may claim to have no particular theological agenda in regards to the resurrection of Jesus, her positions effectively criticize those who would rely upon historical investigation to establish theologically-productive data.

The approaches of Crossan, Lüdemann, Marxsen, and Levine have several things in common. First, they all see the historical Jesus and hence the earliest content of the Christian faith as something partly, largely, or mostly obscured by the canonical scriptures, in creative, deliberate fashion. This is more than the distance between ancient and modern paradigms that Perkins noted; this is the attempt of the early Church to construct a new metaphysical vision on the bare bones of an ordinarily human Jesus. Second, they all suspend judgment on the precise place of the historical Jesus in the divine economy. Jesus was a teacher, perhaps a healer, and perhaps even in some ways God’s mouthpiece. His message may have proven to be more profound and world changing than others, but this does not entail an ontological or even a missiological uniqueness. And third—and perhaps consequently—they all describe the resurrection in terms of the experience or reflection of the early Christians. Left to be inferred is just

65 Ibid., 39, 40.
how Jesus in resurrection is different from any other figure of the past whose memory continues to be lively enough that the remembrance is experienced as an encounter.

Are these similarities the result, in whole or in part, of their historiographical method? None of them work in purely Troeltschian mode, perhaps reflecting their encounter with postmodernism; the first three want to assert something of divine activity in Jesus, while Levine declines the invitation. Without an objective, historical resurrection forcing the question, all Gospel traditions indicating Jesus’ uniqueness are declared to be later creations of the church with no authentic reference to the historical Jesus. Accordingly, without Jesus’ uniqueness, a unique post-mortem existence isn’t called for. In any case, the work of these three authors certainly raises into relief those questions endemic to the New Quest for the historical Jesus. Is there any way to select data without prejudice? Are the criteria for authenticity really any more scientific than—or are they ultimately the product of—intuitions that certain material represents the Jesus which the historian is comfortable acknowledging? Can Christian theologians and historians be bound to modern historical method and its implicit worldview when dealing with material whose clear intention is to proclaim the existence of a radically new and different paradigm?

Religious Faith Integrated With Historical Research: Wright, Meier, Borg, and Schnelle

Some New Testament scholars acknowledge the relevance of theology to historical investigation, and seek to be explicit about theology’s influence on their work.
N.T. Wright identifies his agenda as attempting to answer the following questions: (1) How does Jesus fit into Judaism? (2) What were Jesus’ aims? (3) Why did Jesus die? (4) How and why did the early Church begin? and (5) Why are the Gospels what they are? Wright adds that there is a sixth question, not historical in nature, but always lurking just beneath the surface, about agenda and theology: “How does the Jesus we discover by doing ‘history’ relate to the contemporary church and world?”

Wright attempts to be methodologically explicit by offering a brief sketch of his “critical realism,” for which he credits Ben Meyer. Simply put, Wright says that historians can afford neither on the one hand to function as naïve realists, as if the historian’s own views are not actually in play, nor on the other to be trapped in the world of phenomenalism and structuralism, where there is no hope of ever clearly identifying the referent of a text. Rather, historians must engage in, and be observant of, their own critical reflection on their perception of the data. With this awareness in place, the historian identifies a question, and creates a hypothesis in the form of an ordered narrative that seeks to answer the question. The narrative cannot “prove” the hypothesis in mathematical fashion, because it is not purely analytical in nature but rather synthetic and creative:

There are three things a good hypothesis (in any field) must do…. First, it must include the data…. Second, it must construct a basically simple and coherent

\[\text{\textsuperscript{66}}\text{N.T. Wright,} \textit{Jesus and the Victory of God,} \text{Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996, 117.}\]

overall picture…. (Third,) the proposed explanatory story must prove itself fruitful in other related areas, must explain or help to explain other problems.  

According to Wright, those who argue that we cannot approach the resurrection historically because resurrections do not occur in our experience would by that logic forbid any historical investigation into the rise of the early Church, or any other historical particularity that has not happened in our contemporary experience.  

Examining all the evidence, Wright contends, the historian will find that the resurrection of Jesus is a critical part of the narrative that answers the question of how Christianity started, and why it took the shape it did.  

In short, Wright argues that given the understanding of resurrection in first-century Judaism, and the centrality of the claim that Jesus rose from the dead to early Christian faith, the most plausible historical hypothesis is that Jesus in fact rose from the dead. The hypothesis, says Wright, is strengthened by the observation that the early Christians did not make a general, metaphysical claim (e.g., all people rise) but rather a particular claim about one historical person. The hypothesis is further strengthened by the clumsy character of the resurrection narratives, which “have the puzzled air of someone saying, ‘I didn’t understand it at the time, and I’m not sure I do now, but this is more or less how it was.'”  

Wright offers the developmental addendum to this hypothesis that, because of his resurrection, Jesus was spoken of by the early

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70 Ibid., 20.  

71 Ibid., 611.
Christians first as Israel’s messiah, then as God’s representative, then as the world’s true sovereign, and then as “one” with the creator God and the Spirit of God—as the New Testament writers “point towards the later theologies in which these three came to be seen, mysteriously, as differentiated yet interpenetrating revelations of one God.”

Wright takes great exception to the non-eventful, non-bodily “resurrection” proposed by Crossan, Lüdemann, and others. Wright would argue that appearances with no perception of an embodied quality would (a) not be called a “resurrection” by first-century Jews, and (b) not give rise to the empty-tomb tradition as we have it. Furthermore, the fact that there were no eyewitnesses to Jesus’ emergence from the tomb does not, for Wright, exclude the resurrection from the realm of historical investigation, since much of historical writing proceeds on inference, especially in cases of causation. Still further, while Wright obviously sees theological implications for his hypothesis, he believes that his hypothesis is not theological in nature if he allows that Jesus’ rising from the dead in bodily form does not of itself necessitate the inference of divine activity—although, within a theistic framework, Wright could point to this divine activity as the most likely explanation. Ultimately, to speak of resurrection, Wright sees the need to convert the Troeltschian principle of analogy from an iron law to a rule-of-thumb, and needs to extend the principle of correlation to include God within the universe of possible correlates for otherwise unexplained occurrences—but Wright still has to work within the principle of probability in order to consider himself to be a historian of any kind, albeit a

\[72\] Ibid., 735.
theologically-inclusive one. Wright believes that he can—and should—ultimately integrate his religious faith with historical method to achieve the best historical result.

John P. Meier presents us with the image of an “unpapal enclave” of a Protestant, a Catholic, a Jew, and an agnostic, and declares that he is seeking a historical reconstruction of the life and ministry of Jesus that all four of these would find acceptable. He recognizes, however, that his attempt to prescind from a traditional faith-stance “is itself a ‘faith stance’ in the wide sense of the phrase…. There is no neutral Switzerland of the mind in the world of Jesus research.”73 As he proceeds, Meier tries to be aware of the interpretation already involved in the selection of data, and of the temptation to reducing any historical individual to the intersection of surrounding social, economic, and political forces, which is “unscientific and unhistorical because it cannot come to grips with all the data” (i.e., the individual as individual).74 He stresses the need for modesty in historical-Jesus reconstruction, acknowledging that the historical sources at hand do not attempt to tell us everything that could have been known about Jesus, and do not provide answers to all of our modern questions: “To be sure, the Gospels serve as the chief sources for our reconstruction of the historical Jesus; but to speak of the Gospel writers as presenting or intending to present the historical Jesus transports them in an exegetical time machine to the Enlightenment.”75 Even with the prioritizing of Q, without


74 Ibid., 11.

75 Ibid., 26.
the basic Markan chronological outline, we have only scattered fragments and no means of contextualizing any of Jesus’ reputed words or deeds; neither source criticism nor form criticism—because they are literary tools—can ultimately authenticate the original form or context of any saying as it existed in oral transmission. He deems the use of apocryphal gospels in historical-Jesus research to be of extremely limited value because of their lateness and their ideological opposition to earlier sources: “critics like Crossan, Koester, and James M. Robinson are simply on the wrong track.”

Meier feels free to use and even expand the list of criteria for determining historical authenticity, naming criteria of embarrassment, discontinuity, multiple attestation, coherence, the rationale for Jesus’ rejection and execution, traces of Aramaic, (evidence of) Palestinian environment, vividness in narration, tendencies of the developing synoptic tradition, and presumption of historical coherence. In doing so, Meier consciously employs historical inference, for instance, in the case of the novelty of the Christian interpretation of the resurrection as implying Davidic messiahship, which he says can be historically accounted for if Jesus had spoken of, or been spoken of, as being of Davidic stock during his lifetime. Meier, unlike Wright, formally excludes the resurrection narratives from historical consideration, or any inference of resurrection, such as Wright employs, saying, “the restrictive definition of the historical Jesus I will be

76 Ibid., 122.

77 Ibid., 168-184.
using does not allow us to proceed into matters that can only be affirmed by faith.”

However, temporarily and self-consciously removing his hat as “an exegete using purely historical-critical methods” to put on the hat of “a theologian,” he declares that for the purposes of historical inquiry,

the ‘real’ has been defined—and has to be defined—in terms of what exists within this world of time and space, what can be experienced in principle by any observer, and what can be reasonably deduced or inferred from such experience. Faith and Christian theology, however, affirm ultimate realities beyond what is merely empirical or provable by reason: e.g., the triune God and the risen Jesus.

Meier, while admitting that some kind of faith-stance is ingredient to all historical work, strives to neutralize his own faith-stance while he works as a historian, in the limitations of that discipline. In doing so, though, he cannot help but point to his personal conviction that a complete historical investigation of Jesus, which would include claims to his resurrection, requires an expansion of historical methodology to include religious faith.

Marcus J. Borg allows the canonical Gospels to flesh-out the understanding of the historical Jesus derived from Q, but sees the Gospels as comprised of a blend of history and metaphor. Some recorded episodes are, in our modern sense, historical narratives; far more, however, are what Borg calls “history metaphorized,” wherein a historical incident has been recast in mythical terms so its theological significance can be seen. Borg sees the historical Jesus as non-messianic and non-eschatological, but rather than invoking the image of Cynicism, Borg deliberately uses terms with little or no purchase in first-century Judaism: Jesus was a “spirit-person,” calling people’s attention to “a non-material level

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78 Ibid., 13.

79 Ibid., 197.
of reality.” Jesus was a “teacher of wisdom,” calling people to a first-hand experience of God; Jesus was a “social prophet,” arguing for an ethic of compassion to overtake an ethic of ritual purity; and Jesus was a “movement founder,” creating a radically-inclusive community. Those passages in the Gospels that develop a Christology higher than these images are most likely to be creations of the early community.  

Borg admits that

[the image of Jesus I have sketched in the preceding chapters is quite different from the popular image of Jesus, the Jesus many of us have met before. His own self-understanding did not include thinking and speaking about himself as the Son of God whose historical intention or purpose was to die for the sins of the world, and his message was not about believing in him.]

However, Borg eschews manners of speech that would identify the historical Jesus as the “real” Jesus with the Christ of faith as a mere object of belief, preferring the terms “pre-Easter Jesus” and “post-Easter Jesus.” The post-Easter Jesus is not simply a theological construction but “an element of experience…. After Easter, his followers experienced him as a spiritual reality, no longer as a person of flesh and blood, limited in time and space, as Jesus of Nazareth had been.” The Gospel accounts of the resurrection may well be historical visions of Jesus—that is, spiritual experiences that happened to concrete individuals in space-and-time—that have been recast as narratives and set in the

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immediate wake of the crucifixion. Borg therefore does not deal with the resurrection as a singular historical event, and is clearly skeptical that anything remarkable happened to the corpse of Jesus. For Borg, the resurrection is the real presence of Jesus as understood to be exalted to the right hand of God. Borg ultimately wants to assert more than Lüdemann and Marxsen, that in their visions, the disciples truly encountered Jesus, and not simply their own memories about Jesus, or the truth about Jesus. These historical encounters were pregnant with meaning: Jesus had overcome death, Jesus had offered himself to God on our behalf, and Jesus was in fact a revealer of divine truth. Borg freely admits that spiritual experiences do not prove anything in the objective sense, but also says that Christian faith is not, in any case, comprised of “objective” beliefs about Jesus. Borg’s insistence that the disciples’ experiences are only fully understood if we acknowledge that their experiences were genuinely encounters with Christ calls for an integration of the possibility of genuine religious experience—which presupposes religious faith—with historical investigation.

Udo Schnelle argues that the historical and the metaphorical in the Gospels cannot be easily separated, that the identification of authentic sayings of the historical Jesus cannot be privileged over the identification of authentic actions, and that there is no such thing as a historical investigation into the life and ministry of Jesus that is not at the same time theological. Every historical hypothesis about Jesus “must explain the different perceptions of his life and ministry that Jesus triggered both before and after Easter, and must offer a plausible account of the differing ways in which his post-Easter interpreters
related their interpretations to the pre-Easter Jesus.”\textsuperscript{83} Schnelle speaks of “the resurrection itself” as an ontologically separate event from the post-Easter appearances of Jesus, and insists that these appearances must have been of a quality that invoked the language of resurrection.\textsuperscript{84} As far as Paul was concerned—and this, for Schnelle, represents authentic, early Christian tradition—“only if Jesus was raised from the dead bodily, and therefore in reality, can Christians place their hope in God’s eschatological act of salvation.”\textsuperscript{85}

For all his stress on the ontological independence of the resurrection from resurrection accounts and resurrection-faith, Schnelle suspects the early Pannenberg of flirting with positivism, as if the facts of history interpreted themselves. However, Schnelle is just as adamant as Pannenberg that declaring historical investigation of the resurrection to be impossible is “illegitimate,” because in that case “the resurrection is left in the rubble of bygone history, and when the connection to an original event is severed, faith becomes merely an ideological assertion.”\textsuperscript{86} Realizing fully the constructed nature of history, Schnelle insists that the only way to deal with the awkward historical factuality of the resurrection is to understand it as a “transcendent” event which, “although it cannot be subsumed [einordnen] under the categories of human reality, it can be coordinated [zuordnen] with them.” By this Schnelle means the resurrection of Jesus

\textsuperscript{83} Udo Schnelle, \textit{Theology of the New Testament} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 68.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Ibid.}, 168.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibid.}, 228.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid.}, 236.
must be understood as “the act of the God who transcends his own eternity.” Schnelle explicitly affirms that since all history is theological, theology is necessary to the comprehension of the historical event of the resurrection of Jesus.

This third group of writers—Wright, Meier, Borg, and Schnelle—differ from the first two groups in that they do not see theology as that which follows historical investigation, but as that which inevitably accompanies it. Whereas in past epochs theology may have constricted historical inquiry, these scholars insist that theology has the power to liberate historical inquiry by broadening its perspective and allowing it to entertain the claims of religious faith. This claim is all the more remarkable when the range of positions and approaches are considered. Wright attempts to work as a historian as long as he can without theology, only calling theology into service when divine causality is required to complete a historical hypothesis; Meier is only willing to engage theology when he has reached the limits of Troeltschian historical method; Borg appears to begin with theology, as his categories of analysis presuppose the reality and non-delusional character of religious experience; and Schnelle consistently and unapologetically works in a theologically-conditioned historical mode.

All four of these writers acknowledge the potency but not the ultimacy of the postmodern critique of historiography, and might be identified with the “Third Quest” for the historical Jesus. In various ways they attempt to allow for the conditioning, but not the determination, of the historical Jesus and his earliest followers by either the times in

87 Ibid., 238.
which they lived on the one hand or our dominant contemporary categories of interpretation on the other. They have attempted to take Jesus’ particularity into account, but they have only been able to do this by acknowledging the particularity of their own interpretative perspectives. On this point Halvor Moxnes correctly queries: “Although the third quest clearly exhibits less interest in issues traditionally spoken of as theology within a church context, is ‘theology’ present in a different and broader sense, in terms of ‘meaning’ and ‘relevance’?”88 The answer, ultimately, must be, Yes, not only for these, but for all historians dealing with religiously significant data.

Some Methodological Correlations

In this section, I will attempt to evaluate the approaches taken by the three identified “types.” In so doing I will note several correlations I have found between the way that New Testament scholars related theology to historical method and their theological conclusions regarding the resurrection of Jesus, demonstrating that choice of historical methodology is far from theologically neutral.

It would seem that from what has been discussed so far, historical investigation into the resurrection of Jesus that follows the course of either of the first two of our types, insulating religious faith from historical research or critiquing religious faith with historical research, is untenable or at least incomplete. That is, if the postmodern critique is to have any impact on historiography at all, there can be no ultimate isolating of

historical investigation from religious faith (at least in the broad sense of that term), such that historical investigation, once its conclusions are drawn, should independently serve to support or critique religious faith. There can be no appeal to pure historical foundationalism, whatever theological conclusions the “facts” lend themselves to supporting. All historical investigation must be done within a certain worldview, or meta-narrative, whether that is considered to be closed or open, fixed or fluid, negotiable or non-negotiable. It is not within the scope of this inquiry to reconstruct one worldview of meta-narrative sufficient or necessary to “genuine” Christian faith, but it is apparent that historiography that attempts to exclude all religious elements from its worldview is ultimately self-deluding: even if the historian’s worldview is not explicit, all historiography is done within an implicit, operative worldview, with varying degrees of coherence and consistency.

The correlation between historiographical method and historical conclusions concerning the resurrection of Jesus is notable on at least three fronts.

First, within the limited range of authors considered here there is a strong correlation between confidence in the application of source criticism to the Gospels in general and the discounting of the historicity of an objective resurrection-event. While the first group of writers (Craig, Habermas, Perkins, and Lapide) shows little or no interest in source criticism, the third group of writers (Wright, Meier, Borg, and Schnelle) acknowledges source criticism but allows for the possibility that later tradition helps to clarify or develop the earlier picture. The second group of writers seeks to reconstruct and privilege earlier literary strata as more authentic: for Crossan, the reconstruction of
Q, the Gospel of Thomas, and the reconstruction of *The Gospel of Peter* are privileged over the canonical Gospels as sources of historical information as being chronologically prior and therefore more reliable testimony to the earliest Christian faith; Lüdemann and Marxsen are confident that earlier layers of tradition can be detected amid the mythological literary overgrowth, especially in Paul’s writings; Levine is more dubious about our ability to reconstruct that earlier picture. This reconstruction of the provenance of extant information about Jesus is usually set in opposition to the idea that the canonical Gospels contain historical reminiscences of eyewitnesses.

While the majority of New Testament scholars employed in Catholic and mainline Protestant seminaries may be prepared to accept some form of the Two Document Hypothesis and consider its implications for matters such as multiple attestation and tradition-development, there is no consensus for enshrining the collection of material common to Matthew and Luke but not in Mark as a “fifth”—and earlier, and more authentic—Gospel. This approach usually features a portrait of first century Christians circulating multiple anonymous collections of reminiscences of Jesus’ sayings upon which the narrative framework of Mark was imposed, and the continued circulation of many different “Gospels” until the Church was institutionally centralized enough to suppress all but its four favoured accounts. Against this portrait, Martin Hengel argues that if the establishment of the four canonical Gospels was a late development, so would be their attributions to apostolic authority, in which circumstances we would expect to find evidence of these Gospels being called by different names. What we in fact have, though, is no trace of anonymity, but a very early second century tradition of four
Gospels, known as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the first and last being apostles, and the second and third, tradition tells us, being companions of Peter and Paul, respectively. Hengel attempts to shift the burden of proof to those who reconstruct alternative Christian communities whose existence, theology, and social position are inferred from non-canonical and reconstructed documents. In rather acerbic tones, Hengel points beyond the historical issue to the historiographical issue when he raises the question of scholarly motivation:

In my view the modern hypotheses about Q are largely built on sand. Here scholars have greatly exaggerated the possibilities of historical and philogocial argument. They are often based on the fashionable wish to have an ‘unkerygmatc’ Jesus and wisdom teacher who moralizes in his social thought, a figure who would better fit into our time. It is then easier to build a bridge from the utter unmessianic construct to the Gnostic sayings collections.\(^89\)

Third, among the authors considered above there is a strong correlation between confidence in the results of applying historical criticism to the Gospel accounts of the resurrection in particular and the discounting of the historicity of an objective resurrection-event. The first group of authors took the historicity of these accounts largely at face-value because of their potential theological implications. While Perkins is more interested in the literary qualities of these accounts, her modest historical conclusions line up precisely with the theological assumptions borrowed from Küng; for the others, the historicity of the accounts supported their theological interpretations, almost without remainder. The second group of authors was thoroughly skeptical of the

historical value of the Gospels. Crossan, Lüdemann, Marxsen, and Levine all see any narrative elements of the resurrection accounts as unhistorical, and all miraculous elements as the creative work of the early Church. All of these writers see the Church’s theological tradition of the resurrection of Jesus as developing prior to the narrative tradition. The third group of authors is more inclined to posit a historical “core” in the resurrection narratives that has been overlaid with theological concerns. Though Meier has methodological reservations about being able to identify this core, and Borg sees the Gospel narratives of the resurrection of Jesus as the mythologization of historical but subjective experiences, Wright and Schnelle believe there is historical data in these narratives merged inextricably with the early Christian understanding of the resurrection’s significance for faith.

C.F. Evans might be considered as belonging to the third type, integrating religious faith with historical research, inasmuch as he allows for the possibility of the claims of the Gospels regarding the resurrection of Jesus being true. He does, however, by taking a slightly different route from any of the scholars considered so far. While not ignorant of source criticism, he contends that there are valuable historical inferences to be made by openly considering the historical likelihood of the Gospels as finished literary products taking the shape they did. He notes that the relative restraint in the Gospels concerning Jesus’ messianic claims is surprising, given the messianic acclamations of Jesus that characterized the earliest known Christian preaching, that of Paul and his sources. This implies either that the Gospel writers were cautious in advancing their claims, or that their modesty in this regard reflected the historical facts as
known to them, that Jesus’ messianic identity was not central to his public message: Evans says the latter is more likely. Even more surprising is the restraint and vagueness in the Gospels of Jesus’ resurrection predictions, given the centrality of the resurrection to the kergyma. This implies either that the Gospel writers were unsure about the significance of the resurrection, or that their restraint reflected their information that Jesus only mentioned his destiny occasionally, and cryptically: again, Evans says the latter is more likely. In the case of the resurrection, the background of a wide variety of Jewish beliefs about life after death in general, and the apocalyptic understanding of the resurrection in particular, make it startling that resurrection was declared to already have happened for Jesus: “It may be to suggest that only this event, whatever it may have been, could have brought it about that there emerged in Christianity a precise, confident and articulate faith in which resurrection has moved from the circumference to the centre.” 90 Rather than viewing the literary features of the Gospels as creating difficulties for the historian, the literary facts, Evans says, imply certain historical facts. Evans concludes that “To say that [the resurrection] was exactly like what any of the traditions describe it as being, or, on the contrary, that ‘it had nothing to do with the rising of a dead body from the tomb’, would be in both cases far more dogmatic that we are allowed to be.” 91


Finally, the authors considered here demonstrate a strong correlation between the confidence of the historical claims made and the boldness of the resulting theological claims. In our first group of authors, Craig, Habermas, and Lapide all make clear and unreserved affirmation of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. For Craig and Habermas, the implications are similarly unreserved: Jesus is who the New Testament claims Jesus to be; for Lapide, Jesus is someone of significance in the divine economy; Perkins, who is far more modest in her historical claims, advances only the theological claims established by others through other means. In the second group of authors, Crossan, Lüdemann, and Marsen all make clear and unreserved denial of the independent eventfulness of the resurrection (that is, the tomb was empty), and see their historical investigations as warranting their translating of the significance of the resurrection into non-narrative, non-mythological, existential terms. Levine, who makes no historical claims concerning the resurrection of Jesus, sees no such warrant. In the third group of authors, Wright, Borg, and Schnelle understand their historical claims to be valid—though Borg’s claims relate only to the appearances, and not to the Gospel narratives’ depiction of an empty tomb—only within certain theological and metaphysical frameworks, and acknowledge that the acceptance of their historical findings will only be found plausible by those who will be willing to consider those prior theological and metaphysical claims. Meier, who is doubtful of the historian’s place among events with obvious theological implications, tries to avoid discussing the theological conditioning of historical investigation into the resurrection narratives, and thereby the conditioning of the results. In all four authors, however, it is clear that within certain theological
parameters, believers can be confident of the historicity of divine action in the resurrection of Jesus.

In what may be a gentle criticism of Wright’s enthusiasm, which may at times sound like historical positivism, J.D.G. Dunn says that the New Testament reports are *data*, and when historically interpreted they allow for, at the very most, the interpretation—*the positing of the facts*—that there was an empty tomb and that the disciples saw Jesus alive after his death. That this should be called ‘resurrection’ in the sense of divine activity “is at best a second-order ‘fact’, not a first-order ‘fact’—an interpretation of an interpretation. *Theologically*, the resurrection functions as a “meta-fact” an “interpretative insight into reality which enables discernment of the relative importance of all other facts.” Dunn’s distinction is helpful, so long as we do not lose sight of the question, “Why did the early Christians, among the options available to them, consider what they had conceived/imagined/experienced/encountered/engaged as *resurrection*?”92 With the exceptions noted: the first group has less difficulty moving from historical claim to theological claim, because they work within tacit theistic assumptions; the second group has more difficulty, because somewhere between their initially agnostic historical investigations and their theological conclusions, they must admit some kind of religious faith into the discussion in an implicitly two-step procedure; and the third group has still more difficulty, demonstrating an awareness of the theological conditioning involved in both their historical investigations and their theological conclusions.

Some of these considerations raised in the context of New Testament scholarship will resurface in the context of the examination of theological scholarship detailed below which, as the discussion to this point might indicate, should be expected, given the inextricability of historical method and religious faith—most explicitly where the historicity of events with religious significance, such as the resurrection, are at issue.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE GREAT DEBATE

After tracing the development of post-postmodern historiography, discussing the applicability of historical method to the event of the resurrection, and exploring the actual employment of historical method by selected New Testament scholars, it remains to engage contemporary Christian theologians in their understanding of the historicity of the resurrection.

Thus far I have indicated that there is justification for the contemporary theologian to appreciate that (chapter two) current historical method does not need to preclude events that challenge reigning metaphysical assumptions; (chapter three) systematic theology can and should play a role in the discussion of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus; (chapter four) in the case of the resurrection of Jesus, decisions about historical method should not be considered neutral in regard to theological outcomes. Below (chapter five) I discuss an article by Alan G. Padgett as illustrative of recent historical-theological reflection on the resurrection. I then discuss various theologians in progression toward my own adopted point of view.

Background Issues: Alan G. Padgett

Alan G. Padgett lays bare some of the critical issues in the relationship of historical method and theology concerning the resurrection of Jesus. In “Advice for
Religious Historians: On the Myth of a Purely Historical Jesus,” Padgett begins by asking his fellow theologians to acknowledge the passing of modernity:

“At one time in our Western universities we were certain of how history should proceed, as a rigorous, value-free, scientific discipline. But that era is now over. How shall we now proceed? Does “anything go” in historical research now that modernity is over? How shall we understand the discipline of religious history in a post-positivist, post-modern situation? For modernity, with its faith in reason and its myth of neutral, scientific scholarship, is well and truly dead. Requiescat in pace."¹

He then proposes to use the resurrection of Jesus as his test-case for “examining the myth of a purely historical approach to religious studies.” In analyzing this “myth,” Padgett enumerates three underlying assumptions:

(1) that religious faith distorts scientific, critical scholarship; (2) because this is true, the only proper, academic, scientific methodology in religious studies is one that rejects religious faith itself; (3) that a purely historical, scientific, faith-free and value-neutral methodology is available to us in what we might broadly call the social-scientific disciplines.”²

Padgett raises the example of former American president Richard M. Nixon to illustrate how there is really no neutrality in any historical research: few researchers would have no prior impressions of his time in office, and any researcher would have difficulty finding unbiased sources. In the case of Jesus, “important advances have been made,” but the “El Dorado” of neutrality has beguiled historians as to the implications of their research. Padgett criticizes those on the right (e.g., Habermas) and the left (e.g.,


² Ibid., 290.
Marxsen) for engaging in what he calls “the neutrality two-step,” wherein, “having recognized the prejudice of perspective,… scholars still seem to hope that our biases and prejudices can be overcome through careful religious neutrality and scientific method.” Padgett wonders aloud as to why this imaginary neutrality is even thought to be desirable: isn’t it possible that, in the case of the historical Jesus, Christian faith gives us better insight than unbelief?

Padgett expresses his displeasure with Meier’s attempt to “dance around” the prejudice of perspective by appealing to a “consensus Jesus,” the historical Jesus as known to us by a consensus of current New Testament scholarship: “As any first-year philosophy student knows,” says Padgett, “the consensus theory of truth is bogus…. At the practical end, we always have to ask the critical… question: who defines the consensus?” Padgett also decries the relentless application of the hermeneutic of suspicion. It is one thing to be critical of historical sources, but it is another to consistently take a “guilty until proven innocent” approach to the New Testament. In the search for the historical Jesus, this is poisoning the well, rendering our best sources of historical data useless. Once we have carefully removed all faith, contemporary or embedded in the ancient sources, we may believe we have a “scientific” idea of who Jesus was, and we may thereby have achieved an Enlightenment ideal, but even if we did, “who wants a religion divorced from reason, or scientific experiments and applications

3 Ibid., 293.
4 Ibid., 297.
that ignore moral truth…. This attempt has been destructive to the human race, to religious faith, to good scientific methods, and to the environment. Science and technology, divorced from religious wisdom and moral values, constitute not only a myth, but the nightmare of the twentieth century.”

Padgett understands how connected the debate over the relationship of history and religious faith is to the debate over the relationship of science and religious faith. Scientists no less than historians must admit the “prejudice of perspective,” and acknowledge that even science is done within a plurality of worldviews. This may be the end of some important dimensions of the Enlightenment, but it is no cause for alarm: “Pluralism and the prejudice of perspective should lead us to humility, but not to despair or to relativism. Cognitive relativism does not follow from plurality or from the prejudice of perspective.”

Knowing that our results are less than certain because they are not neutral does not entail that we are not dealing with the real world, whether we work in modes of Christian, Marxist, or scientific materialist faith. Here Padgett makes a finely-tuned distinction: “I affirm objective truth; it is the claim to objective knowledge I object to.” It is fair to suggest, though, that objective truth has multiple dimensions. One can talk about the historical Jesus without recourse to theological explanations—if we assume a non-theological worldview. In the case of the resurrection of Jesus, Padgett says that if it did happen, it is not subject to natural-scientific explanation. Likewise, it is not subject to historical explanation. Historical science is incapable of making a theological judgement about whether or not God could or did raise Jesus…. So we

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5 Ibid., 299.
6 Ibid., 301.
can and should accept the difference between natural-scientific, social-scientific (including historical), and theological explanations.\(^7\)

In fact, Padgett says that attempts to explain the resurrection historically without recourse to theology can lead to particularly tortured explanations; as an example, Padgett calls Lüdemann’s understanding of the resurrection “far less likely than any miracle!”\(^8\)

Finally, Padgett turns to the notion of religious faith. If “having faith” means having existential certainty, then, quite rightly, as argued from Lessing through to Kierkegaard, “faith cannot be based upon the probability arguments of history, philosophy, and science.” Padgett calls this demand for faith to provide existenial certainty a grievous mistake, though, one which divorces faith from rationality. Padgett says that although he would be willing to die for his faith, still his faith “must be open to rational reflection and revision in the light of reason, evidence, and argument… in more critical and reflective moments.”\(^9\) Padgett adds that, ultimately, “there can be no guarantees to truth, not in the area of faith and not in the area of science.”\(^10\)

Padgett is clearly in step with what could be called post-postmodern historiography. First, he seeks to avoid what he sees as the chief peril of Enlightenment modernism: the divorce of religious faith from science in the pursuit of epistemological purity and objective certainty. Such an approach has devastating consequences for both science and religious faith. Once faith is separated from scientific knowledge in a way

\(^7\) Ibid., 303-304.
\(^8\) Ibid., 305
\(^9\) Ibid., 305-306.
\(^10\) Ibid., 307.
that insulates it from critique, it becomes fideism, and can no longer hope to engage, complement, or challenge science. Science can quickly become the poorer as well, as without a major dialogue partner it raises its own standards of orthodoxy, expels its heretics, and works by means of a crude majoritarianism that effectively eliminates the kind of dissent necessary for intellectual advancement. Second, Padgett points out, confesses, and even celebrates “the prejudice of perspective.” Padgett differs from some postmoderns—and their frightened critics—who believe that the inevitability of perspectivism entails equating truth with the politics of power. While there is no doubt a relationship between that which is understood to be true and the institutions that uphold that vision of truth, history provides examples of the relatively powerless being energized by ideas not upheld by social or political powers—the Christian gospel being one of them. Third, Padgett asserts the objectivity of the world, that it is this and not that, crediting Ben Meyer (who more than anyone else introduced critical realism to the western theological academy) when he says, “Ben Meyer points us to the proper way out of this fear in his review of criteria or indices of authenticity: not to shun subjectivity, but to embrace it as a moment on the way toward objectivity.”11 In doing so, Padgett upholds tradition, which is essentially a community product; while each of us is subject to perspectivism, identifying ourselves as living within a larger discourse helps us to correct and be corrected, to aid and be aided by, more comprehensive understandings of the truth—and be patient with other understandings.

Padgett’s assertions line up, perhaps accidentally, with McIntire’s identification of the three dimensions of history. Though Padgett rightly distinguishes between cosmological events and those involving human motivation—with the former usually referred to as “natural” and the latter usually referred to as “historical”—he may well be open to McIntire’s analytical scheme regarding historical events, wherein natural science (and its inherent metaphysical framework) may identify the ontological dimension of a past event, that is, its relationship to the categories of existence; social science (including historical science) may identify the temporal dimension of an event, that is, its relationship to its contingent, temporally-conditioned causes and effects; and theology may identify the ultimate dimension of an event, that is, its relationship to that which is Ultimate. Though Padgett’s terminology may differ, it seems that he wishes to affirm the same kind of complementarity of disciplines as McIntire envisioned.

By identifying and even celebrating (rather than lamenting) the necessity of perspectivism in scientific as well as historical method, Padgett acknowledges the importance of community while removing the stigma sometimes felt in relation to what H. Richard Neibuhr called “history from the inside.” Theologically-informed historical method is not a compromised version of something purer, but rather a more self-aware version of something ubiquitous.

Constructive Proposals: Carnley and O’Collins

Peter Carnley offers a strong and thorough attempt to come to grips with the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. He states the need for inquirers to penetrate behind
the gospels’ various redactional views to the original experience of the resurrection, and while this is reminiscent of the approach of Crossan, Lüdemann, and Marxsen, Carnley understands that historical criticism alone may be inadequate to an analysis of the Easter event. Carnley also realizes that the structure of faith is in question when it comes to understanding both the original proclamation of the resurrection and our response to it. He points out that three potential descriptions of the resurrection all fall short in one way or another. First, Carnley says that the category of history alone is insufficient to describe the resurrection, since the resurrection is comprised of not merely the empty tomb but the repeated revelatory appearances of the post-Easter Jesus, whereas the discipline of history is focussed on the description of singular occurrences. Second, Carnley says that the category of eschatology alone is insufficient to describe the resurrection, since the resurrection appearances are referred to as having occurred in time and space, with temporal effectiveness. Carnley says that the truly eschatological is by definition beyond our temporal frame of reference. Third, Carnley says that categorizing the resurrection as a non-event is insufficient to describe the resurrection, since the resurrection appearances are depicted as both objective and subjective experiences: the appearances of Jesus are interpersonal encounters between Jesus and those with to whom he appeared.

Carnley concurs with Schillebeeckx that the resurrection is portrayed in the New Testament as essentially a communal experience among the believing disciples. He disagrees with Marxsen’s approach, in which “the faith-response of Christians must be resolved into a single pattern constituted by the central idea of the ‘hearing of the proclamation’, and cannot be an assent based on evidence. This leads to the effective
neutralization of the appearances tradition, which remains as a persistent and embarrassing datum in the primitive accounts of faith.”¹³ While Carnley notes the variation in the response of the disciples, he opposes the idea that Jesus’ different appearances were objectively different: “I do not think it is satisfactory either historically or dogmatically to accept the suggestion that qualitatively quite different experiences were given to different people, so that some might be said to have encountered Jesus in a concrete, material form and others in a more ethereal, visionary or spiritual form.” Carnley prefers to speak of “a variety of attempts to visualize and articulate what was essentially ‘heavenly’ and ambiguous and thus open to a range of speculative interpretations and developments.”¹⁴

For Carnley, while there may be historical particularity to the disciples’ experiences, historical particularity is not to be objectified into the appearances of Jesus. Carnley’s motivation for this approach is explicitly theological: our present experience of the “Raised Christ” is to be identified with the historical Jesus, and our remembrance of the historical Jesus is to be integrated with our present experience of him. In that way, “Easter faith” is the active remembering of Jesus in the life of the Church and the reception of the self-giving of Jesus that we encounter as Jesus actively gives himself to the Church in its life of preaching and sacramental participation. For Carnley, the reality of the resurrection is both past and present, while it points to the future:


¹⁴ Ibid., 241.
The failure of the historical model... saves us from a purely past-centered approach to Easter faith which would allow us to conceive of it merely as a propositional attitude, relating us only to a set of statements asserting ‘what happened’ in the past. The failure of the attempt to ‘prove’ the occurrence of the resurrection by employing the historical model exclusively, also has the positive effect of preventing us from ‘naturalizing’ the resurrection, which, as we have seen, is an inexorable gravitational pull of any attempt to handle the mystery of the resurrection by this means alone. Such an approach must be complemented by alternative avenues of approach, that are not only more appropriate to its nature as an eschatological event, but also appropriate to the apprehension of a present reality and not just to the handling of an occurrence of the past. This means that we must incorporate an epistemology into our understanding of faith, as well as attempting to approach it in a purely retrospective, historical-theological way.\textsuperscript{15}

In his proposal, Carnley wants to preserve a role for theology in the historical reading of the resurrection on an ongoing basis while not insulating the resurrection from genuine historical criticism. Carnley is happy to read the New Testament scriptures critically, but he realizes, with Padgett, that all criticism has its prior prejudices. He also wants to preserve the divine causality of the disciples’ experience of the resurrection, and the divine causality of Jesus’ presence in the Church in every generation, and avoid pure subjectivity that leads to relativism. Carnley also seems to want to preserve some form of collective authority over interpretation of the resurrection. Declaring the resurrection to be a completely \textit{public} event, knowable to faith and unbelief alike, would allow for as many interpretations of its significance as there were interpreters: in that case, Jesus would not be authentically remembered as the one who came to create a new community, and his memory would not continue to create and re-create that new community. In Carnley’s understanding of the resurrection, medium and message come together. To maintain their connection, however, Carnley has given up the notion of the resurrection

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, 365.
being a single event in time and space, of which the appearances of the risen Jesus are consequences: for Carnley, the presence of Jesus in his appearances to his first disciples, and in the later Church, is the resurrection.

Peter Schmidt’s view of the resurrection of Jesus is comparable to Carnley’s. Noting the connection in the New Testament between the resurrection of Jesus and the kerygma, Schmidt says that “if one were to start to compare the Resurrection as ‘fact’ with other possible or actual occurrences, one would totally miss the meaning of the evangelical message and the Church’s statement.”

Schmidt points to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist as “real” but not “empirical. Schmidt says that “the objectively real character of the resurrection ought to be maintained,” but “since the resurrection, man understands his life and his history differently....” Therefore, in the resurrection, “we are dealing with an objective reality, but this reality as such is not understandable outside of faith.”

Xavier Leon Dufour’s position is also similar to Carnley’s. Conceding that the New Testament speaks of a bodily resurrection of Jesus, Dufour says that in the case of any human being “my historical body is constituted by the various relationships which I establish in the midst of the universe.” Dufour seeks to bring together the Protestant emphasis on preaching and the Catholic emphasis on sacrament in speaking of the here-and-now “bodily” presence of Jesus: through both kerygma and Eucharist it is the same

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17 Ibid., 84, 85.

Jesus of Nazareth, whom God raised from the dead and who, in the form of the Word and in the form of the act, makes himself present here and now.”  

While Carnley’s, Schmidt’s, and Dufour’s understanding of the resurrection may be theologically attractive to many practicing Christians, it runs the risk of denying the historicity of the resurrection by denying its particularity as an event and making it a distinctive category of experience. Historical events are by their very nature singular in time and space. By allowing the significance of the resurrection of Jesus to completely absorb its temporo-spatial uniqueness, this proposal falls into the postmodern trap of denying any ontological independence to the resurrection. While their intention of emphasizing the ongoing presence of Jesus in the Christian community is admirable, in the end they have cut off the possibility of further historical research challenging the Christian community’s understanding of the resurrection.

Gerald O’Collins wants to assert the distinctiveness of the resurrection event from the appearances of the post-Easter Jesus to the first believers. He is critical of those who say that the resurrection was not an event in the ongoing life of Jesus, but a metaphorical explication of God’s providence in creation; in such a case, “the second article of the Creed makes no advance over the first: Christological belief adds nothing to belief about God’s creation.”

O’Collins sees the attempt to translate the accounts of the resurrection appearances into categories of psychology or near-death experiences or anything

19 Ibid., 244.

perennial as totally wrong-headed. At one point he even accuses those who discount the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ appearance to the women outside his tomb as rooted in sexism, reproducing ancient caveats about women as reliable witnesses.\(^{21}\)

O’Collins is quite willing to argue history on historians’ grounds. He dismisses the relevance of ancient mythological parallels, noting that these myths involve “obviously non-historical figures.” He also asks how anyone could argue that

a first-century Christian, deeply committed to the new faith, most probably of Jewish background, obviously steeped in the Jewish scriptures, and of no great literary talent, like the author of Mark, could or would have consciously drawn on what was, on her own showing, largely a Graeco-Roman mythological scheme about someone’s translation (into heavenly existence), to compose a complete ‘fiction’… as a way of proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection from the dead?\(^{22}\)

While O’Collins will not let anyone use historical inquiry to discount the resurrection of Jesus, neither is he ready to let someone assert its factuality by use of historical inquiry. For O’Collins, “the resurrection is not an event in space and time and hence should not be called historical,” because “through the resurrection Christ passes out of the empirical sphere of this world to a new mode of existence in the ‘other’ world of God. He moves outside the world and its history, outside the ordinary, datable, localizable conditions of our experience—to become an ‘otherworldly’ reality.”\(^{23}\) It is not altogether plain whether O’Collins is making an epistemological statement or a metaphysical statement by using the term “empirical,” but it seems safe to infer that

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 15-16.

O’Collins means that the resurrection, as an event that necessarily involves God’s action, is not fully comprehensible by historical method:

God is described as entering dramatically at certain times into the lives of a particular set of men—Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and others. But such encounters do not make God’s existence historical. Likewise, the appearances of the risen Jesus are not historical from his side, even if they do form part of the history of Peter, Paul, and the other witnesses of the risen Lord.²⁴

O’Collins wants to preserve the eventfulness of the resurrection, and wants to acknowledge that the historian’s right to observe ends with the elements of space and time. In arguing for the empty tomb and the testimony of the women, it could be inferred that O’Collins believes that the historian could claim, by the application of historical method, that Jesus was seen alive again after his death, and that there is supporting physical evidence to tie the risen Jesus to the crucified Jesus, and that this evidence goes right back to the Sunday morning after the crucifixion. Here he would appreciate David Fergusson’s comment on the women’s testimony, who notes that the employment of the empty tomb as a symbol does not entail that it was “originally devised by the community for that purpose.... It could even be that there is a valid argument running in the opposite direction, viz., that in order to function adequately as vehicles of proclamation these narratives must be modelled upon some historical reminiscence.”²⁵ O’Collins would deny that the historian as historian has the right to infer divine causality, here standing on the same ground as Meier, Tilley, and many others. He is also keen to extinguish any


lingering notions that the New Testament declarations of Jesus having been raised from the dead are to be taken as merely metaphorical or interpretative of the disciples’ experiences, or, on the other hand, as demonstrable to those without faith. However, O’Collins runs the risk of denying the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus by ruling it outside of time and space.

Any attempt to theologically insulate the resurrection of Jesus from the investigations of historians, while rightly asserting that there is never any pure divorce of observation and evaluation when it comes to historical events, nevertheless gives too much away. The resurrection of Jesus has the potential to be theologically regarded as the event which creates the distinctively Christian understanding of history. Without upholding its historical dimension, the resurrection becomes a perennial mythos, and Christian faith loses much of its force to critique historical process with historical data.

Testimony: Schussler-Fiorenza and Craffert

Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza categorizes the principal options of the relationship of historical knowledge to theology in regards to the resurrection, and proposes a substantially different approach. First, he first describes how “Traditional Fundamental Theology” in the Roman Catholic tradition understands the resurrection to be the ground of faith: because we know by means other than faith that Jesus rose from the dead, we can therefore appropriate faith in the risen Lord. This approach is quickly undermined by

26 Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza. Foundational Theology and the Church (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 5-55.
literary and historical criticism of the Gospels and, whatever the results of such inquiry, puts the Christian faith at the mercy of historians. Padgett might be comfortable on this ground, but Schüssler-Fiorenza is not. Second, he describes how “Transcendental Fundamental Theology” understands the resurrection as an object of faith in its intrinsic revelatory significance, accessible to all as the affirmation of the human longing for permanence in the face of death: because we know by means other than faith that we need to have faith, we can therefore choose to have faith in the risen Lord. This approach is soon undermined by the acknowledgement of a plurality of worldviews and their particular statements of fundamental, existential questions, and puts the Christian faith at the mercy of contemporary culture. Third, he describes how the “Contemporary Historical-Critical Approach” understands the resurrection as the result of reflection by the disciples on the identity of Jesus: because prior to having faith we can appreciate the demythologized message of Christian faith, we can commit ourselves to this message, symbolically expressed as faith in the risen Lord. This approach is immediately undermined by the historical claims in the Gospel accounts of an event far transcending a psychological occurrence.

Schüssler-Fiorenza begins construction of a different approach with the distinction between historical reconstruction and testimony. Whereas historical reconstruction seeks to maximize accuracy and intelligibility by attempting to insulate the results of historical investigation from interpretation, testimony unabashedly reports and interprets in the same action. In the New Testament documents we find testimonies concerning the resurrection of Jesus in two principal forms: short doxological formulas
that emphasize Jesus’ eschatological significance, and narratives that emphasize continuity between Jesus and the Church. Getting “behind” these testimonies to find a historical “core” would actually provide us with less, not more, understanding of the resurrection than the testimonies offer: “The combination of the motifs of commissioning and identity show that the basic goal of the appearance stories is not to prove the resurrection of Jesus but to show the link between the Church’s mission and the historical Jesus. The identity of the Risen Lord with the historical Jesus is the key to the appearance stories... Faith in the resurrection has its ground within these testimonies rather than outside them.”

Employing the category of “testimony” is not, for Schüssler-Fiorenza, the means of disenfranchising historical investigation. While historical investigation may choose not to incorporate the Christological dimensions which Christians have inferred from the resurrection of Jesus, historical investigation may legitimately find itself at the threshold of such considerations. The historian, for instance, can make substantive inferences from the presence of “hymnic texts found within the New Testament. They show that the belief in God’s action on behalf of Jesus was present very early in Christianity. However, they do not answer the historical and genetic questions: how did the early Christian faith in Jesus’ resurrection emerge?"

Schüssler-Fiorenza argues that to believe the testimonies of the New Testament is to say that the resurrection gave rise to reflection on the life of Jesus, not the other way


around. These testimonies do not simply relate an event within history as previously understood; as testimonies, they report an event *that has fundamentally changed history itself*:

Expressed in the affirmation of Jesus’ resurrection is a vision which shows all reality to be meaningful because, in the end, goodness and justice as the final ground of reality triumph over evil and injustice. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus, therefore, is not simply a belief in a historical event that stands isolated in the past and separated from our present view of reality; it is a vision and a view of the total meaning of reality.

This vision, this integration of historical particularities with ultimate thematic meanings, interprets the historical Jesus, because it is an affirmation that the risen Jesus is the historical Jesus. The early Christians looked for the great themes of the resurrection—the triumph over death, the creation of community, the affirmation of justice prevailing over evil—in their recollections of his life and teachings. The power of these testimonies forms the ground of contemporary Christian faith, and not any “uninterpreted” account of the life of the historical Jesus.

Richard Bauckham also says that it needs to be recognized in reference to the Gospels “that the kind of historiography they are is testimony.” Because testimony is, like auto-biography, self-consciously personal, “an irreducible feature of testimony is that it asks to be trusted,” because the witness has put his or her credibility at stake in testifying. Bauckham suggests that

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29 Ibid., 43.

[t]heologically speaking, the category of testimony enables us to read the Gospels as precisely the kind of text we need in order to recognize the disclosure of God in the history of Jesus. Understanding the Gospels as testimony, we can recognize this theological meaning of the history not as an arbitrary imposition on the objective facts, but as the way the witnesses perceived the history, in an inextricable coinherence of observable event and perceptible meaning. Testimony is the category that enables us to read the Gospels in a properly historical way and a properly theological way. It is where theology and history meet.”

Not all testimony is to be trusted, of course, but there is more at play in the evaluation of testimony than independent corroboration: evaluating testimony involves the credibility of the witness, the reasonableness of what is testified to, even the community that credits the testimony. A highly credible witness’ testimony may be received as reliable even if uncorroborated, where the corroboration of an incredible witness may be deemed unreliable even if corroborated by other incredible witnesses.

Schüssler-Fiorenza reminds us, though, that “to the extent that the resurrection of Jesus is a historical event, to that extent the ontological ground is accessible to Christians today only through the New Testament testimonies.” Whether or not the testimonies found in the New Testament are to be trusted by historians, however, is a matter for debate, and will vary somewhat depending on the historiographical method employed, and “there is, of course, widespread disagreement about what constitutes a proper degree of certainty and what constitute the canons of historical method.”

Pieter F. Craffert argues that the only legitimate way to receive the New Testament testimonies is as being authentic to their own culture and not to ours. Craffert

31 Ibid., 5-6.


33 Ibid., 246.
describes the options of an anthropologist who has received testimony as to unusual occurrences: the anthropologist can (1) refer to them as real, which would be inauthentic for the anthropologist but affirming of the authenticity of those reporting; (2) reject them as wrong or mythical, which would be authentic for the anthropologist but denigrating of those reporting; or (3) recognize that these occurrences are real and constitutive of reality to those reporting them, in the same sense as the anthropologists beliefs are real and constitutive of the anthropologist’s reality.

According to Craffert, using this “cultural-sensitive” approach allows us to observe several things about the New Testament testimonies. With regard to the empty tomb, “if Jesus had appeared to so many people and after death continued a bodily existence as reported by the visions, it was obvious for them that the tomb must have been empty. They lived by a different logic.”34 Given the interest in bodily resurrection, visionary experiences were enough for the first Christians to conclude and authentically testify that Jesus had risen bodily from the dead. Craffert goes on to identify the “ethnocentric disbelief” of much critical New Testament scholarship, the “ethnocentric belief of orthodox New Testament scholarship,” and the “polyphasic” appreciation of the authentic cultural relativity of the “social-scientific perspective,” which appreciates the effective reality of the resurrection for the first Christians and our need to understand Jesus’ post-Easter appearances as visions attending to altered states of consciousness, and

34 Pieter F. Craffert, “Did Jesus Rise Bodily From the Dead? Yes and no!” Religion and Theology 15 (2008), 140.
the accounts of the empty tomb as sincere and necessary inference on the part of the early Church.

While Craffert’s approach does seek a middle way between affirming or denying the historicity of the resurrection, it incorporates several unsubstantiated historical claims. First, it assumes a certain functionality of resurrection-belief within first-century Judaism wherein post-mortem appearances would be interpreted as bodily resurrection, something odd for those acquainted with, for instance, the tradition of Samuel’s appearance at Endor (1 Samuel 28:3-25) or the raising of the widow’s son by Elijah (1 Kgs. 17:17-24).

Second, it assumes a willingness on the part of first-century hearers to posit the existence of something that was in principle empirically verifiable, without any interest in such verification. Third, it assumes a thorough disassociation in historiographical practice on the part of the Gospel writers from what is known to have existed in the wider culture of the Roman Empire of the first century. Fourth, it assumes a radical distance between first century Judaism and our day and age in terms of the connection of evidence and historical inference. Finally, Craffert’s approach assumes that New Testament scholarship is, and must remain, within the naturalistic framework of the “social-scientific perspective.” Here Pannenberg’s criticism of Troeltsch seems relevant: Craffert, in attempting to be anthropological, has become unnecessarily anthropocentric, at least for the purposes of theology.35 While Craffert introduces new language to the discussion of operative worldviews and historical method, in the end his argument remains within the orbit of postmodern structuralism, and declines the post-postmodern

opportunity to affirm the multidimensionality of historical reality. Schüssler-Fiorenza’s account, on the other hand, takes full account of the conditioned nature of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection without denying their external reference.

The Resurrection Accounts as Narrative: Hans Frei

Hans Frei develops his own approach to the historicity of the Gospels. Frei sees a divide between conservative apologists on the one hand, and liberal apologists on the other: conservative apologists work to demonstrate (or assert theologically) that the true reference of scripture is to the objective facts of history, while liberal apologists strive to demonstrate (or assert theologically) that the true reference of scripture is to theological or existential principles. Frei calls this the “abuse” of the biblical narrative, especially in the case of the Gospels, which occurs with the adoption of

…a faulty, one-sided view of the New Testament narrative as purely historical and/or kerygmatic—never literary. In contrast to both, I believe one may affirm (a) that in the narrative the person of Jesus is available to us descriptively; (b) that there is identity between Jesus so described and the savior’s description, and hence (c) there is continuity between Jesus and the proclamation of his name in the early community. I believe further that this descriptive availability, identity, and continuity represent not a transformation of Jesus into a myth but the demythologization of the savior myth in the person of Jesus.  

In his literary reading of the Gospels, Frei argues that the Gospels present Jesus in a way that is not historical in the sense of being neutral about their subject, because Jesus is consistently interpreted as “the Risen One”; nor, however, do they present Jesus in mythological terms, without concern for historical referent. Rather, the Gospels are

“history-like,” because in the Gospel narratives, “it is simply the unsubstitutable person about whom the story is told—his unsubstitutable deeds, words, and sufferings—that makes the real difference.”

Frei is particularly critical of those who want their cake and eat it too, those who “deny the invidious distinction between insiders and outsiders to the truth” because they are determined to correlate “the unsurpassability of the New Testament narratives’ ascriptive references to Jesus” with “general religious experience,” making the latter the real referent of the former. Whereas many interpreters of the Gospels sought Jesus’ identity primarily in his teachings, Frei argues that the true identity of any person is most evident in the unity of one’s intentions and actions. According to Frei, the Gospels describe Jesus’ identity as self-manifested in “(1) Jesus’ obedience, (2) the coexistence of power and powerlessness, (3) the transition from one to the other, and (4) the interrelation of Jesus’ and God’s intention and action.” The real Jesus is not merely what he thought and taught, but how he acted and lived.

While the Gospels provide accessibility to the identity of Jesus, this is not the same as “reliable historical information about him”—at least not according to a modern

37 Ibid., 111.
40 Ibid., 164.
historian’s criteria. Modern historical criticism, in Frei’s estimation, is rooted in the idea that the real subject of a text is somehow “behind” the portrait offered: the text obscures as much as it reveals. He calls this “subject-alienation,” because the true subject is other than the depiction. Alternatively, in the literary criticism of a novel, the presumption is that the subject truly is as depicted. Frei calls this “subject-manifestation,” because the text offers us the best information we can hope to have. Frei goes on to explain that on an everyday basis, human beings operate on subject-manifestation assumptions, even in regard to themselves: we presuppose integrity between intention and action, such that we can infer something of one’s identity from one’s actions. In reading the Gospels, we cannot help but be impressed with the integrity of Jesus in the portraits: in embracing the narratives, rather than deconstructing them, we are able to grasp Jesus’ identity. The Gospels depict Jesus in the subject-manifestation mode of a novel, while insisting on his particular historical identity.

According to Frei, the Gospels were written in the belief that the identity of Jesus was manifested in—and not obscured by—the details of his movements and interactions. Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, is characterized by his unsubstitutability, self-manifestation, and identity: in the evangelists’ minds, the real Jesus is not hidden behind the Gospels’ accounts of him, but presented in their accounts. He is not being conformed into pre-existing categories, but his historical particularity forges new categories: he is the Crucified one, and he is the Risen one. This is precisely why their writing is not

\[41\] Ibid., 175.
comprehensible using the naturalistic assumptions of modern historical criticism: they are historical narratives, but not written according to the principles of modern historiography.

Francis Watson echoes that when he points out that for the historian attempting to surmise “what really happened,” in the case of the Gospels,

we may choose to regard the representations as misleading and self-contradictory, and see access to the object prior to its representations. If so, however, we should recognize that we ourselves have constructed this unrepresented object, separating it out from the wider contexts that give it its meaning and significance…. [And] we should reject the assumption that this approach alone deserves to be regarded as “historical,” or that it undermines the gospel narratives, or that it can determine the truth or falsehood of the Easter faith itself.  

For Frei, the “history-like” Gospel accounts of Jesus presuppose “a world in which there are not idealist reservations of the spirit cut off from the ceaseless ebb and flow of contingent events.”

In fact, if we are to read the Gospels as they were written, and do justice to them as literary compositions and as historical documents, then to think of Jesus as not having been raised is to deny that these texts depict his identity, because it is there that they focus this identity. The resurrection is, in these texts, the climax that organizes and confirms all else that can be said about his identity. If it is denied, the rest of that identity is reduced to a selection of unordered anecdotes, the unity of which will have to be sought in a way which is not depicted in the text but imported by the reader. A Jesus who has not been raised is not this Jesus.

Since the Gospels depict the identity of Jesus most clearly in his resurrection, it is impossible to accept the Gospels’ depiction of Jesus while rejecting the reality of the


43 Mike Higton, Christ, Providence, and History: Hans W. Frei’s Public Theology (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 110.

44 Higton, 115.
resurrection: there is a historical claim bound up in the Gospels’ accounts. To fail to read the implications of Jesus’ resurrection back into the Gospels’ testimony regarding Jesus is an inauthentic reading that results in the total disregard of the evangelists’ depiction of Jesus.

Commenting specifically on the resurrection, Frei distinguishes among four modern views about the New Testament statements on the nature of the resurrection: (1) mythological, referring to the “re-presentation of Jesus where the life of faith is truly proclaimed and accepted”; (2) literal, in which “the subject matter of the texts and the reality to which they refer are to be taken equally literally”; (3) broadly spiritual, that is, “the reality is more important than the text and to be reconstructed though strict historical research together with philosophical speculation”; and (4) referring to a real event, “one to which human depiction and conceptions are inadequate, even though the literal one is the best that can be offered.” Frei calls this last view “the adequate testimony to, rather than an accurate report of, the reality.”

Though this testimony does have evidentiary value for the resurrection “to the extent that it is a human historical event like any other,” to conceive of its primary purpose as a factual report is to re-conceive the resurrection as a nature-miracle in eighteenth century Enlightenment terms. Accepting the resurrection narratives are a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition, for Christian faith. Frei goes on to say that the New Testament does not try to solve “the quandary of a live physical presence after death,” but that the point of the resurrection narratives “is simply

to bear witness to the fact that Jesus, raised from the dead was the same person, the same
identity as before.” Frei would agree this much with Gabriel Fackre: “Story by no
means excludes history. The Christian recital could not exclude empirical narrative or it
would cease to be Christian, for its central events presuppose hard empirical claims—
Jesus did live, Jesus did die on the cross.”

In the end, though, Frei would sound the cautionary note regarding assertions
about the resurrection: “It is well to understand this powerful assertion religiously rather
than metaphysically, for metaphysical schemes, like myths, change but the Word of God
abides.” It is not so much how Jesus was raised from the dead by God that matters but
rather that Jesus was raised from the dead by God, and that it was this Jesus, the Jesus of
first century Nazareth, the Jesus of the Gospels, the Jesus of the cross, the
unsubstitutable, historically particular, Jesus. Mike Higton has captured something of
Frei’s theological position when he says that this reading of the Gospels would suggest
that “by proclaiming a miracle in the midst of history, history is freed of the intolerable
burden of somehow being naturally the home of the absolute, and so is allowed to be
itself again.”

46 Ibid. 43.
47 Gabriel Fackre, The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine, Vol. 1
(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 27 cited in John J. Johnson, “Hans Frei as Unlikely Apologist for the
Historicity of the Resurrection” Evangelical Quarterly, 76:2 (2004), 150. Johnson argues that Frei’s work
can be used apologetically, but his argument, as Frei’s, is only capable of illuminating believers, not of
convincing unbelievers.
48 Frei, “How It All Began,” 144-145.
49 Higton, 117.
John Webster musters a different argument for the irreplaceable nature of the resurrection narratives. Webster says that historical criticism of the scriptures cannot be allowed to obscure the theological truth that the scriptures are ontologically distinct from other texts. A “naturalist textual ontology” does “not give any direct indication of the place of the texts in a divine economy,” and systematically “fails to grasp what is metaphysically fundamental in biblical hermeneutics: Christ is God, and he is speaking.”\textsuperscript{50} Taking the New Testament writings as scripture is to declare that the hermeneutical task is to understand not why Mark said what he said in the past, but to understand what Christ is saying to believers in the present. The resurrection is itself the foundation of understanding that the scripture is the \textit{viva vox Christi}. Webster also insists that “Scripture is not born along by the church, as if the church’s historical life were the medium or atmosphere without which Scripture itself would have no life…. Rather, in its practices the church—to put the matter in what seems absurdly simple terms—\textit{listens}.”\textsuperscript{51}

Webster’s understanding of scripture might be seen as sympathetic with those views of the resurrection that emphasize the parallelism of the notion of the presence of the risen Christ among the apostles and within the Church through the ages. However, as to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, Webster’s understanding marginalizes historical criticism, and flirts with fideism. Perhaps a less problematic approach would be that of Scot McKnight, who says that historical research into the New Testament should

\textsuperscript{50} John Webster, “Resurrection and Scripture” in Andrew T. Lincoln and Angus Paddison, eds., \textit{Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives} (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 134.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Ibid.}, 150.
proceed in the same way that other ancient documents are approached, not first with a hermeneutic of suspicion but rather with a “hermeneutic of love,” rooted in belief that “genuinely trusts the word of others” as authentic until there is reason to believe otherwise, that does not allow “the Subject (reader) to swallow up the Object in his or her own ideological agenda,” but at the very least elects to, facing the prospect of inauthenticity, “delay the judgment until after genuine encounter and reading of the text occur.”

Jesus’ Resurrection as Bodily: The Christian Tradition and N.T. Wright

A further look at Wright’s historical method can be undertaken on the question of the physicality of the resurrection. Wright frequently admits his debt to Ben Meyer on many counts, adopting Meyer’s critical realism, his historical method, and his attitude toward texts. Meyer strives to find a balance between a consistently sceptical approach on the one hand and a naive textual empiricism on the other:

The object of interpretation has been a much-confused as well as much-disputed issue. We define it as the intended sense of the text.... When we speak of “the intended sense” (the object of the task of interpretation), we understand it to include tone, nuance, affirmation—in other words, the whole of textually realized intention. What must not be overlooked is that affirmation—and so truth claim—is integral to the intended sense of all texts to be interpreted, be they contemporary or no.53

52 Scot McKnight, Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005), 38.

In simplest terms, in reading the New Testament documents, an interpreter’s first responsibility is to determine precisely what the author has in fact managed to say, and then ask why. In dialogue with Marcus Borg, N.T. Wright stresses that in order to do this the interpreter should first appreciate the text in “emic” categories—those native to the writer—rather than “etic” categories, those native to the interpreter.\(^{54}\) In the case of the resurrection, we must first see what it was most likely that the New Testament authors understood by the idea of “resurrection.”

Surveying Old Testament sources, Wright concludes that Israel’s understanding of resurrection was never a disembodied life-after-death. While he admits that the hope of national restoration-as-resurrection came first in historical sequence, he says that the hope of personal immortality-as-resurrection soon followed: “YHWH’s answer to his people’s exile would be, metaphorically, life from the dead (Isaiah 26, Ezekiel 37); YHWH’s answer to his people’s martyrdom would be, literally, life from the dead (Daniel 12).”\(^{55}\) Examining sources from Second Temple Judaism, Wright points to various ideas of life after death, but when it comes to the use of the term “resurrection,” he only finds plenty of confirmation, and no explicit contradiction, of the hope for individual immortality in terms of bodily resurrection from the grave “on the Last Day.”\(^{56}\) J.L. Crenshaw traces the

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\(^{56}\) Ibid., 204.
dialectical development of resurrection language and concurs with Wright’s findings, saying that

...the powerful sense of communion with Yahweh and belief in the Deity’s creative might and justice provided the basis for the idea of an immortal soul and resurrection of the body. The catalyst that broke these ideas open and produced full-blown concepts of immortality and resurrection was apocalyptic theology, and its accompanying persecution of the righteous.... Old views exercised surprising tenacity in the fact of alternative concepts, as if striving to keep theological discourse honest.57

Paul’s correspondence, the earliest extant textual testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, shows clearly that Paul maintained and taught “a firm and sharply delineated belief in a past event, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.”58 In fact, Wright believes he has to belabour this point because much exegetical work and theologizing concerning the resurrection has proceeded on the assumption that the eventfulness, the historicity, of the resurrection can be ascribed to the creativity of the Gospel writers as they “mythologized” the visionary experiences of the post-Easter Jesus into narratives. Rather, the Gospels’ emphases parallel those of Paul in stressing the double meaning of resurrection carried over from the Old Testament, adding the eventfulness of Jesus’ personal resurrection, and marking the increasing differentiation between resurrection and various incidents of resuscitation.59 What happened to Jesus was the resurrection of his body, in anticipation of the bodily resurrection forecast for all of God’s people on the


58 Ibid., 374.

59 Ibid., 448.
last day. Jews living in the time of Second Temple Judaism would have been exposed to various understandings of post-mortem existence, including Platonic notions of freedom from bodily existence, the Sadducean understanding of immortality consisting in the continuation of one’s family line or at least the memory of one’s name, and various popular notions of ghosts. The understanding of “resurrection” was varied as well. Some held that the hope of resurrection was historical in the sense that the nation would recover from its misfortunes, as in Ezekiel 37; some held that only the righteous would experience resurrection, and that the dead would be left in the grave, as in Psalm 37; some held that there would be a general resurrection of all, with a judgement to follow, as in Psalm 1; some held that the souls of the righteous are held in heaven, awaiting reunion with their bodies laid in the earth, as in Psalm 50. Among the various options, both canonical and non-canonical testimony present a remarkably unified understanding of Jesus’ resurrection, all the more surprising for the fact that this represented a significant modification of one of those options.

Wright does not underestimate the challenge of trying to promote the idea of Jesus’ bodily resurrection in the twenty-first century, to New Testament scholars, theologians, or anyone else: “To say, as the early Christians did, that the tomb was empty, and that the ‘meetings’ with Jesus took place, because he had indeed been bodily raised from the dead, seems to require the suspension of all our normal language about

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60 N.T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, 190-206.
how we know things about the past.”\textsuperscript{69} Wright at times introduces words such as “transformed” and even “transphysical” to indicate some change to the nature of Jesus body in its resurrection state, but he does not engage in extensive speculation on that front. Wright tries to focus on the historical task at hand, of accounting for the particular testimonies of the first century Christians that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Precisely because there is no neutral standpoint for the work of the historian, Wright admits,

\begin{quote}
I do not claim that [my reconstruction] constitutes a ‘proof’ of the resurrection in terms of some neutral standpoint. It is, rather, a challenge to other explanations, other worldviews.... Historical argument alone cannot force anyone to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead; but historical argument is remarkably good at clearing away the undergrowth behind which scepticisms of various sorts have been hiding. The proposal that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead possesses unrivalled power to explain the historical data at the heart of Christianity.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

Some Interim Conclusions

Both the nature of the documentary witnesses as well as the nature of historical reasoning itself does not allow for any indisputable facts to act as axiomatic foundations for a purely deductive treatment of the resurrection of Jesus. Nor is there one universally agreed-upon understanding of the nature of the resurrection event itself, from which to infer certifiable historical data. However, working out the parameters of a historical-theological investigation into the resurrection of Jesus can lead us to some arguable starting points.

\textsuperscript{69} N.T. Wright, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 710.

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Ibid.}, 717-718.
First, it is defensible within scholarly discourse to proceed with a “post-postmodern” historiography when investigating the historical claims pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus. The discipline of doing history has survived, in part by sheer will, the postmodern critique’s relativization of historical research. If anyone wants to doubt the importance of history, he or she only need imagine a world devoid of history, where each and every experience was entirely new. How would anyone know how to act? How would anyone communicate? How would anyone have any semblance of identity or self? History has not survived so much because its validity is logically demonstrable as because it is psychologically necessary: we think, speak, and live in narrative, and historiography provides our shared narratives which anchor our several societies. Although historiography can no longer proceed on foundations either of divine or royal authority, where sacred texts are considered immune from criticism, or of a naive empiricism, where facts are thought to speak for themselves without interpretation, we must do history to be human. McIntire was right to describe the multi-dimensionality of history, including the “ultimate” dimension; since we all live within worldviews and meta-narratives of some kind, there is an implicit claim—however remote—of ultimacy in all our historical inquiries. It is in this self-aware, conditioned, yet open-ended sense that we consider whether or not we can deem any alleged occurrence to be “historical.”

Second, it is defensible within scholarly discourse to proceed with a historical method adequate to the subject matter of the resurrection of Jesus. A worldview that allows for divine causality is hardly disqualified from being considered as history; rather, as all versions of historical method are qualified by metaphysical assumptions, this God-
inclusive version is one among many versions of qualified historical method. Any attempt to enshrine a particular, conditioned worldview, such as that employed in an unyielding application of Troeltsch’s principles of “scientific” historical method, as both necessary and sufficient to doing history wrecks on the postmodern critique of historiography, and categorically excludes all historical claims concerning the resurrection of Jesus per se. Whether the burden of proof lay on those who would assert the possibility of miracles or other extraordinary events or on those who would deny that possibility depends on the intellectual environment in which the discourse finds itself. The fragmentation of the discipline of history is not a new development, but the recognition of the fragmentation of historical inquiry is relatively new among academic historians and theologians alike, and requires exposition among those who would consider claims to the historicity of the resurrection.

Third, it is defensible within scholarly discourse to engage in historical inquiry into the resurrection of Jesus investigating those texts which are construed by most scholars—historians, theologians, and “hybrid” New Testament scholars alike—to be those originally presenting historical claims for Jesus’ resurrection: those of the New Testament and those determined to be contemporary with these. Prescinding these sources from historical criticism on the one hand, or imposing alien schema of interpretation on the other, may or may not be theologically motivated, but severely limits their value as historical sources, by cutting them off from the rest of our knowledge of the world which conditioned their creation. A critical-realist epistemology that allows for self-reflective inquiry into the external reference of texts can be applied in a way in
which the individual texts illuminate the collection of texts, and vice versa, in conjunction with non-textual (archaeological) evidence, toward the creation of hypotheses that incorporate the maximum amount of data in the most elegant form and demonstrate explanatory power beyond their immediate subject. In the case of the resurrection of Jesus, hermeneutical procedures that systematically discount historical reference in religious texts do not represent a historical method adequate to the subject of the resurrection of Jesus.

Fourth, it is defensible within scholarly discourse to proceed from the conclusion that the New Testament texts, when taken together, refer to the historical event of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. While the presence of the risen Jesus is spoken of as being in the community, in the reception of the message, in the Holy Spirit, and in the Eucharist, the New Testament consistently asserts the eventfulness of the resurrection: God’s historical raising of Jesus from the dead was immediately inferred as the precondition of his appearances in conjunction with the report of the empty tomb. The reports that we have are all by witnesses who inferred divine causality had been at work in Jesus’ resurrection, such that their testimony is to a great act of God in time and space, and not merely a contingent event or interpretative fable. While the primary purpose of the Gospels, including their resurrection narratives, is to testify to the identity of Jesus, namely, that Jesus is the Risen one and that the Risen one is Jesus, they demand the inference of historical reference. The New Testament also refers consistently to the resurrection of Jesus as bodily; though the precise nature of Jesus’ post-Easter bodily existence is not defined, the most natural inference is that the texts of the New Testament
refer to the resurrection of Jesus in terms of the eschatological expectation of a general resurrection of the dead in bodily form.

Finally, it is defensible within scholarly discourse to suppose a linkage between inferences of divine causality posited in regards to the resurrection of Jesus and other inferences of divine causality, that is, that the what, when, where, who, how, and why of the resurrection of Jesus are connected in God’s counsels. Rather than curse the difficulties in accessing the event of the resurrection of Jesus with our present historical methodology, we should appreciate both the event and the preserved, if varied, testimonies as God’s gift. Raymond E. Brown, in spite of his reservations about the originality of the empty tomb tradition, concludes that “from a critical study of the biblical evidence I would judge that Christians can and indeed should continue to speak of a bodily resurrection of Jesus”\(^71\)—though what kind of body is being spoken of here is not fully accounted for in the New Testament. This limitation, Brown acknowledges, may be frustrating to believers far-removed from the first century, who struggle with this conceptuality, but Brown calls his fellow Christians to remember that

the modern world view is no more infallible than the first-century world view—it knows more about some things but is less perceptive in other ways. Our generation must be obedient, as were our predecessors, to what God has chosen to do in Jesus; and we cannot impose on the picture what think God should have done.\(^72\)

\(^71\) *Ibid.*, 127.

CHAPTER SIX: UNDER CONSTRUCTION

While the above points of departure cannot in the strictest sense be deduced from unassailable or axiomatic assumptions, or from inarguable historical evidence (which, by the very nature of history, cannot exist), I argue that they do represent a reasonable and defensible perspective, and from such a position key theological implications of declaring the resurrection to be historical can be drawn. In order to consider directly the theological implications of declaring the resurrection to be historical, it has been necessary to be clear as to what is meant by “historical,” by “resurrection,” and, in some ways, even what it means to “declare.” The historiographical nature of the New Testament testimonies and theological speculations on the nature of the resurrection event are in themselves fascinating and inexhaustible subjects. At some juncture, however, having come to interim conclusions about these matters, the question should be asked: what are some possible theological implications of declaring the resurrection of Jesus to in fact be a historical event?

Since the resurrection of Jesus, as Christian tradition understands it, is a singularly revelatory event of divine causation, and resurrection is per se an eschatological event, this chapter begins by discussing how the resurrection of Jesus may serve as an eschatological hermeneutic. We then explore three theo-eschatological implications of declaring the resurrection of Jesus to be a historical event pertaining to the category of
time, the introduction of novelty into the historical process, and the notion of cosmic
destiny, or telos. I have selected these three in part because they permit us to reconnect
with our three featured twentieth century theologians—Balthasar, Moltmann, and
Pannenberg—and because they connect with contemporary theological conversations. I
have also attempted to be attentive to emerging voices in theology, including those of
feminist and non-European theologians.

The Historical Resurrection of Jesus as Eschatological Hermeneutic

If the resurrection of Jesus is considered historical, that is, an event that belongs in
the temporal continuum of human history, it is an event unlike any other. It is an event
that can be construed as having ultimate implications for human existence (and perhaps
all existence), since it implies that death itself has been overcome, in our time and space,
by a human person. I would argue that declaring the resurrection of Jesus to be historical
does not simply tell us about something that happened in the past, but implies something
about the way that God deals with humankind in the present and in the future as well.

Robert W. Jenson points to the problematical nature of relying upon historical
criticism to ground our theological understanding of Jesus: “When this policy is adopted,
the time between us and any past event is no longer experienced as continuity with that
past, but as distance to be overcome, and never altogether.” Jenson captures the
twentieth-century dialogue very well when he says:

Let historicism but touch traditional theology ever so slightly, and the following
instantly results. The past happening with Jesus becomes ‘the historical Jesus,’ the
figure described by research into the Jesus-tradition. The present God-meaning of what happened with Jesus—‘the Christ!’—becomes the meaning that works itself out in the intervening history of existential appropriations, and continues to do so as we now make our appropriations.... ‘Jesus of history/Christ of faith’ is not a problem of research or even of historiography in the usual sense. It is a problem of systematic theology, and a very old one.¹

For Jenson, it is the very specificity of the person of Jesus that contains the “gospel promise,” and it is “our ineradicable longing for more comfortable lords than a risen Palestinian” that motivates us to contain Jesus within previously-determined metaphysical constructs, even “History (with capital).” The inference of Jesus’ presence in the proclamation is entailed by belief of the proclamation, because the gospel is a promise that only Jesus has the right to make: “Either the gospel is a deception, or when it is spoken, he is speaker.” According to Jenson, Bultmann rightly understood the resurrection to be the hinge of the gospel, but erred in not allowing the historical eventfulness of the resurrection to belong to the proclamation: “that he is coming,” says Jenson, “is itself part of what we remember, and therefore remembering can never become irrelevant to the proclamation of his coming.”² Bultmann’s error has the rather serious consequence of forcing Bultmann to regard the gospel

...as demand rather than promise; for where the crucifixion by itself defines the content of the gospel, there is nothing to promise.... Against this, we must assert: the particular executed man Jesus lives; this is the saving fact the church has to announce. The hidden pattern has been: the man at work back there, the God at work now. Jesus of history versus Christ of faith, is merely the historicist version.


² Ibid., 121.
The true pattern is: the man behind us and the same man before us, and God as the miracle of this bracketing.”

The sheer “otherness” of the past can be a barrier to comprehension of (and communion with) it. As Jenson reads the New Testament, the disciples’ understanding of the presence of the risen Jesus is materially identical with the eschatological expectation of his future coming; therefore, to say that Jesus rose is the same thing as to say that Jesus is coming, and vice versa. Knowing this past-and-future reality is the same thing as to be grasped by the promise, and “the appropriate effort of verification is active commitment to the hope it opens.” To deny that this constitutes “real” knowledge of what happened in the past is to “abide a priori by definitions of knowledge posited by worship of the transcendence of the past. Where the gospel works its liberation, this god is no longer worshipped.” Since in his liberating teachings and practices Jesus’ “word and commitment promised precisely a life free from all reiteration of the past,” unless Jesus is himself “living to be awaited from the future, is there any point in worrying about the historical Jesus.” In fact for Jenson, the attempt to connect “the historical Jesus” with “the risen Christ” is nonsense to the Christian: “The historical Jesus and the Christ of faith are the same person, in one case recollected, in the other awaited.” To depict him merely as a noble exemplar of human virtue may be legitimate when proceeding from assumptions that systematically exclude divine action, but for the Christian, the historical-and-risen Jesus defines all human virtue, “for these words touch the world as they do, and fit into

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3 Ibid., 122 (emphasis original).
4 Ibid., 123.
sentences as they do, only in a language-game whose rules are set by one part of the story about this man: ‘he is risen.’”

Jenson is explicitly opposed to both biblical literalism on the one hand, and historical foundationalism on the other. He is critical of Pannenberg who, through a slight adjustment to historical method, proposed to establish a bottom-up Christology; however, like Pannenberg, he wishes to unite the Jesus of history with the Christ of faith, and does not want to cede the right of judgement to a supposedly neutral historical method. To do so is to make the past, and only the past, determinative of the gospel. A truly eschatological approach—which is what the scriptural testimonies invoke—makes the future determinative of the gospel, and thereby determinative of our recollection of the past. In this way Jenson seeks to strengthen the proleptic nature of the resurrection emphasized by Pannenberg. He also seeks to avoid what could be construed as the historical analogue to Frei’s literary category of “subject-alienation”: whereas Frei was concerned to eliminate the “broad, ugly ditch” between the historical Jesus and the depiction of Jesus in the Gospels, Jenson wants to overcome the tension between Jesus as a figure of the past and Jesus as a figure of the future. For Jenson, this is accomplished by making the historical method as specific as its subject, something uniquely required in the case of the One who is regarded as the hope of humanity.

In the symposium “Resurrection—Interruption—Transformation: Incarnation as Hermeneutical Strategy,” Anthony Godziebo, Lieven Boeve, and Michele Saracino

\[5 \text{ Ibid., 124.}\]
reflect in similar ways on the theological implications of the historical *specificity* of the incarnation and explicitly connect the historicity of the incarnation with the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. Citing Timothy Radcliffe’s remark that “If Christianity is true, then it does not have a point other than to point to God who is the point of everything,” they comment that “our emphasis here, in other words, is on the value of historical and material particularity in mediating this ‘point.’”⁶ They also approvingly cite Karl Rahner’s insistence that Jesus’ resurrection was the resurrection of the historical Jesus who is in himself “the *personal* Absolute.... This, however, can only be found where Jesus of Nazareth is, this finite concrete being, this contingent being, who remains in all eternity.”⁷ Against the Enlightenment tendency to see the specificity of Jesus as exemplary of more general, abstract, truth, they argue that the Christian proclamation by its very nature *depends* on specificity and particularity—in a word, embodiment.

Godzieba stresses that Christianity, if it is a “system,” is a historical system:

One cannot ignore the fact that belief in Christ’s bodily resurrection stands at the beginning of Christianity, and belief in the resurrection of our bodies stands at the ‘end.’ These defining moments form an *inclusio* that structures all Christian life and is the reason for Christianity’s fundamental commitment to Incarnation and sentimentality.⁸

Godzieba also cites Brown as having properly construed the dynamic tension that exists between the ethics of eschatology and the historical particularity of Jesus’ resurrection:

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⁷ Ibid., 779.

⁸ Ibid., 784.
If Jesus’ body corrupted in the tomb so that his victory over death did not involve bodily resurrection, then the model of destruction and new creation is indicated. If Jesus rose bodily from the dead, then the Christian model should be one of transformation. The problem of the bodily resurrection is not just an example of Christian curiosity; it is related to a major theme in theology: God’s ultimate purpose in creating.  

Godzieba adds that “Whatever their source in the oral tradition, the gospel narratives and the witnesses they represent insist that the language of corporeality—its use as well as its conscious misuse by the stretching of its boundaries—can begin to express this experience of the risen Christ.”  

If the Incarnation is in part “the recognition and celebration of the capacity of the material and the particular to mediate divine presence,” then the “the grammar of the Resurrection is the intensification of the grammar of Incarnation.” The truth of Jesus’ teachings only becomes actualized by their incarnation in Jesus’ life and actions; further, that actualization did not take place in “an all-purpose, generic, one-size-fits-all human nature,” but rather in the specificity of a particular human life.  

These considerations are important to Godzieba for two reasons. First, the grounding of the truth of Christianity in the historically specific resists the reduction of Christianity to one more therapeutic player in the human potential movement. Christian faith does not consist in distilling the essence or the dynamic of what God has done in  


11 Ibid., 788 (emphasis original).  

12 Ibid.
Jesus, but in recognizing it in all its concreteness, entailing an appreciation that is lived out in similar concreteness, in action that embraces each follower’s own historical particularity. Second, the vulnerability displayed in God’s self-incarnation, made everlastingly permanent in the resurrection of Jesus, implies a continuing vulnerability in the expressing and living out of Jesus’ proclamation. The attempt to develop “a post-postmodern Christian humanism,” one which rejects a purely functional view of language about humanity and yet acknowledges the power of contemporary critiques of universal claims, must be willing to emphasize “the essential role that embodiment plays” in the attempt “to promote human flourishing.”

Responding to Godzieba, Lieven Boeve concurs that for Christians the resurrection is the historical spur to claims regarding Jesus’ theological uniqueness, but admits that “the ongoing defense of Jesus Christ as the ultimate expression of the core of the Christian faith remains a problem for continuing dialogue with other religions and convictions.” Rejecting pluralism, which relativizes Christian truth claims, and understanding Rahnerian inclusivism as a subtler, more polite version of exclusivism (inasmuch as Christian truth remains the standard by which all truth is ultimately judged), Boeve redefines the options in interreligious dialogue as universalizing and particularizing: the revelation of God in Jesus is either universal—and therefore divorced from the historically “accidental” nature of Jesus’ human existence—or particular—and

13 Ibid., 795.
14 Ibid., 796.
therefore merely the product of historically “accidental” processes. In either case, “truth” is thought to reside in the abstract and universally-applicable idea rather than the concrete particularity of Jesus. Rather than producing despair, Boeve argues, the historical particularity of God’s revelation in Jesus creates for the Christian a “different inclusivism,” by which Christian particularity is employed in a self-conscious generosity toward the positions of others: “Aware of the fact that we are participants, and learning about others in contact with each other, we are capable, to a degree, of changing our perspective, without denying the irreducible otherness of the other in the process.”\(^\text{15}\)

Boeve reiterates that “the truth of the Incarnation indicates... that the particular is constitutive of the truth, essential and indispensible. Truth is real, concrete, incarnate, and can only be grasped as such,” and the resurrection is, for Christians, the point at which they claim that Truth is ultimately revealed in the “concrete humanity” of Jesus:

“After his death, his disciples confessed this same Jesus: that he had risen, and that he was the Christ, God’s Son, \textit{in} his humanity and not \textit{in spite} of it. The one who desires to know God must look at Jesus.... For Christians, therefore, God’s manifestation in Jesus Christ forms the hermeneutical key to the particular and contingent.”\(^\text{16}\)

Therefore, to confess that all understandings of God’s revelation in Jesus are themselves particular and contingent does not invalidate them, but may rather be taken together as indicative of God’s desire to be incarnate in the contingent and particular.

\(^{15}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 804.

\(^{16}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 805.
Boeve goes on to say that the centrality of the resurrection “confirms and supplements the theological-epistemological link between Incarnation and truth,” inasmuch as the Resurrection is accessible only through a hermeneutics of testimony, an auto-implicative witnessing.... The faith in a God who rescues the one who lived his reign up until death on the cross, as a promise to us all, fosters a very specific view of history and reality.... In the Resurrection, Jesus who died for us is risen, opening for us historical human beings, embedded in particular histories, a future beyond death—not by lifting us out of this particularity or undoing it, but by healing and transforming it into life in all its fullness.17

In response to Godzieba and Boeve, Michele Saracino notes that for Godzieba, the resurrection of Jesus “is the event that prohibits one from fixating on... either the here and now or the hereafter, as Jesus’ rising from the dead conflates the nearness of corporeality with the distance of the eschaton.”18 For all she commends his lifting up the theme of embodiment, Saracino also asks just whether any embodiment will do: “Could black, womanist, feminist, mujerista, and queer theologians use his framework to speak of their own particularity, or is there something more purposely open about Godzieba’s theology? ...Put differently, what does a ‘post-postmodern’ embodied person imagined by Godzieba’s ‘post-postmodern theological anthropology’ look like?”19

Saracino applauds Boeve’s identification of the twin traps of interreligious dialogue: destroying the alterity of the faith of others by making “transcultural, universal, and death-dealing claims” against them or denying the alterity of the faith of the others

17 Ibid., 807.
18 Ibid., 810.
19 Ibid., 811-812.
by “watering down one’s own religious particularity in order to embrace the other.”

The Christian claim regarding the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus is a central element of Christian particularity, and Saracino congratulates Boeve on “calling Christians to move beyond their comfort zones... asking them to engage in interreligious dialogue, much like Jesus’ disciples did, who encountered the empty tomb and the resurrected lord with both a certainty of their love for him and an openness to finding out where that love might lead them.”

For Godzieba, Boeve, and Saracino, the bodily, historical resurrection of Jesus, coupled with the theological doctrine of the Incarnation, lays the groundwork for the possibility of theological exploration in a post-postmodern manner, in which all Christian claims are firmly held and freely shared—in all their historical and perspectival particularity.

Since the resurrection of Jesus fulfilled existing eschatological expectations (even as it sifted them and unified them), the early Christian testimony regarding the resurrection was not merely descriptive but prescriptive, as it looked toward the eschatological judgement of heaven and earth. The ethical implications of their declaration that Jesus was alive were driven by the belief that just as Jesus had died for them, he was now alive for them. The earliest witnesses themselves felt challenged and compelled by their encounter with the risen Jesus to overcome their fears (Mark 16), believe the unbelievable (John 20), share in fellowship with one another around this new reality (Luke 24), and tell the world (Matthew 28). They quickly framed their testimony

\[\text{\textsuperscript{20}}\text{Ibid., 812-813.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}}\text{Ibid., 814.}\]
to the world as a message requiring repentance and self-inclusion in the new messianic community (Acts 2), a high standard of morality (Colossians 3), and faithfulness to Jesus until the end (Revelation 1).

Further, the early Christians regarded the resurrection as not merely historical but hermeneutical. They saw the resurrection as a confirmation and definition of their future, and interpretative of their present reality. They believed their prior, if tentative, identification of Jesus as the eschatological messiah confirmed; Jesus was the One of “That Day.” That meant their community was in fact anticipatory of the eschaton, and they were in possession, at least in an anticipatory way, of that “new life” that now belonged to Jesus. The proclamation of God’s kingdom, and the ethical teachings that accompanied that proclamation, was no mere passing phase of history, but the very end of history itself, and the followers of Jesus were somehow living in “the last days.” This gave their fellowship an ultimacy that could not be transcended. Their lives were not merely shadows of the Real, but they participated in the Real itself.

God and Time

The declaration of the resurrection of Jesus to be historical makes a great deal of difference concerning God’s relationship to time. In various contexts, the understanding of Incarnation might bear resemblance to passive emanation, or, in reverse ontological priority, a higher degree of participation in divinity than ordinarily borne by God’s
creation. In either scheme, God may remain directly unaffected by the Incarnation. The resurrection of Jesus, however, because of its uniquely historical and eschatological character, raises the question of God’s involvement in time, and the admissibility of considering time to be a category of God’s existence.

Adam Eitel argues persuasively that for Barth, the resurrection of Jesus is nothing less than the historicization of God’s being. For all of Barth’s qualification of the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection, Barth upholds the objectivity—the “that, there” quality of being beyond the imagination of the perceiver—inasmuch as he upholds the bodily nature of the resurrection. Eitel traces Barth’s arguments that the resurrection was not in any sense “necessary,” either as being soteriologically necessary—the atonement was complete with Christ’s self-offering—or as being the product of natural forces: “To raise (ἐγείρειν) the dead, to give life (ζωοποιεῖν) to the dead, is like the creative summoning into being of non-being, a matter wholly and exclusively for God alone, quite outside the sphere of any possible co-operating factors....” He then recalls Barth’s axiom that “God is not other than his deeds”: if God acts as Trinity, for instance, then God is Trinity. In the case of God’s freely and eternally chosen self-revelation in Jesus, “God is being-in-


act, not as generic *actus purus*, but in the particular act of self-relation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”  

Specifically, then, “in the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have to do with a movement and action which took place not merely in human history but first and foremost in God Himself... the historical fulfillment of which is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”  

However, says, Eitel,

> If the preceding observations are correct, then God’s eternal triune act of being and Christ’s resurrection from the dead are not peculiar or separate acts. Rather, Christ’s resurrection was the historical continuation of God’s eternal being-in-act. In other words, when God gave Godself to history in this way, nothing “new” took place in Godself; in fact, God revealed Godself as the One God has always been.

Eitel goes on to say that “the resurrection was nothing less than the historicization of the intra-triune activity of God’s own being,” and in doing so he is not arguing that the resurrection imported the category of time into God’s eternal nature, but rather that the resurrection reveals that dimension of God’s being which we in space and time can only comprehend as history: “The resurrection is ontologically significant because it is the unique *telos* of God’s eternal decision to instantiate God’s triune being-in-act in the space-time nexus.... The resurrection was nothing less than God’s activation of Godself *ad extra*.”

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27 Barth, *CD IV/1*, p. 304, in Eitel, *Resurrection*, 44.


Eitel also notes the centrality of the Son to the doctrine of election for Barth: the Father eternally willed to make the Son pre-eminent over everything. Therefore the resurrection, while not necessitated by Christ’s atoning death, was not merely an appendix to it, the divine response to the historical accident of Jesus’ execution, but the epitomizing demonstration that “God is not simply Deus pro nobis; God is Deus pro nobis in se.”  

Eitel goes on to quote Barth in language that connects the Godzieba-Boeven-Saracino discussion to the comprehension of God’s self-revelation:

In the event of His resurrection from the dead, His being and action as very God and very man emerged from the concealment of His particular existence.... In it He expressed Himself from without for us. In it He gave Himself to be seen and understood as the saving, upholding, sustaining center of His circumference, as the salvation of all creation and therefore of us all.

It is at least consistent that God should display the *eternal particularity* of divine being within the *historical particularity* of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. William Placher notes how the Gospel accounts of the resurrection seem to be quite jumbled compared to the narratives of Jesus’ ministry and death, but says that we should not find this surprising: “If these witnesses are truthful, then Jesus’ resurrection was not an ordinary historical event but one that transformed the whole of history.”  

God’s particularity challenges all existing categories of time and space.

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For Balthasar as much as for Barth, historical particularity is revealing of God’s selfhood. Balthasar emphasizes the particularity of God’s actions within the larger scriptural narrative, understanding these not as the exclusive realm of God’s activity but as the norming centre of interpretation. Balthasar accuses Hegel of subsuming all of history under an abstracted norm, and counters Hegel’s systemization by declaring Jesus to be the historical norm of all history. Not in spite of but rather because of the historicity of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Jesus “can be simultaneously the Lord of all creaturely norms in the sphere of essential being and in that of history.... Thus theology in the strict sense of the word cannot do any abstracting at all; all it can do is to display the normative shining out from the irreducible fact.” Any “use of general truths, propositions and methods... must be careful that everything of this kind always subserves the contemplation and interpretation of the unique.”

Though Balthasar is well acquainted with ancient, medieval, and modern Western literature, he is adamant that we gain nothing by considering Jesus as “a saviour figure,” Mary as “a god-bearer,” John the Baptist as a “precursor,” Ezekiel as “a prophet,” the apostles as belonging to the category of “discipleship,” or Peter within “the general master-disciple relationship.” Balthasar rhetorically asks,

Is the faith of a Christian one particular instance of ‘faith in general’, and so subject to investigation by the behavioural sciences? The answer... must be no; not because there is no analogy between the general human law and the special Christian fact, but because this special fact, by virtue of Christ’s uniqueness, is so

constituted as to be, in all its historical singularity, the concrete norm of the abstract norm itself.\textsuperscript{34}

It is this “historical life of the Logos—to which his death, Resurrection and Ascension belong” which is “the living center of history itself.”\textsuperscript{35}

Geoffrey Wainwright highlights Balthasar’s interest in the temporal dimension of soteriology by noting his distinctive emphasis on the time between Jesus’ crucifixion and his resurrection. The “descent into hell” of Jesus is, in Balthasar’s words, “a kind of ‘suspension’ of the Incarnation, whose result is given back into the hands of the Father and which the Father will renew and definitively confirm by the Easter Resurrection.”\textsuperscript{36} Does this signal that for Balthasar there is a more concretely historical movement within God? Balthasar would probably not want to go that far: elsewhere he says that “Christ’s death—glorified and transfigured and made eternal in the wounds of the Risen One—remains an indistinguishable moment within his eternal life from the beginning.”\textsuperscript{37} What Balthasar does want to emphasize is that our redemption, though born of an eternal decision, is achieved in time: Balthasar, unfashionably by his own admission, defends the Anselmian satisfaction-theory of redemption.

The idea that God can be reconciled by an historical act is said to be not only anthropomorphist but false, since the Father does not send the Son so that he may

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 24.


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 438.
be reconciled with the world through the Son’s cross but simply out of merciful love for the world. Those who seek to undermine Anselm’s fundamental intuitions falsify and diminish the mission of Jesus, which thus is bound to become a mere, symbolic illustration of something that already *is the case* anyway.... [Rather,] the mission of Jesus is concerned with reconciling the world with God (2 Cor 5:18f) and reconciling the tension that exists in mankind between species and individual. Therefore he has to take the initiative on behalf of this totality-in-tension; and this cannot take place from outside, as it were, as if *pro nobis* simply means ‘for our benefit’: it must take place from inside; he must really take upon himself the personal and social situation of the sinner. Thus the *pro nobis* means ‘in our place’. 38

Balthasar consistently insists on the historicity of our redemption, such that we are “seized at the core of our being by the resurrection of Christ from the dead. It is an event which completely re-values the whole of individual human life, as it does the whole of human history.” 39 In making this move, Balthasar is not only able to identify the historicity of the resurrection as central to our redemption, but to open the door for our participation in this redemption through historical means, namely, the sacramental life of the Church. Balthasar is quite aware that the Church, judged by secular standards, will be found wanting: it has not lived up to the reality it proclaims. Human society, becoming increasingly organized apart from the transcendent reality the Church holds forth, declares the cleavage between history and faith to be irreconcilable: “The Protestant view of history (e.g., those of Niebuhr, Löwith, Barth) developed from the supposition of such


a cleavage.” By this remark, Balthasar points to the creation of an ideal which is purely eschatological in nature, with no historical mediation apart from the historical event of the resurrection of Jesus. While he admits that there is some meaning to the notion of “sacred history,” for Balthasar these real events must be seen as a subset of the totality of real events of history.

This is important as Balthasar, again distinctively, highlights the forty days of Jesus’ sojourn with the disciples before his ascension. This period of time demonstrates that the Risen Jesus is not in virtue of his resurrection sealed off from involvement in this world. “The time of the forty days is thus genuine time, though indeed no longer time dedicated to death, but resurrection-time.... Hence the Lord’s earthly life... is transformed into his Resurrection, taken up into it, eternalized, and thus made into a living possession that he can share, the thing of which he is going to build his Church.” For Balthasar, the eschatological character of the resurrection of Jesus does not bracket subsequent history so radically that the activity of the Spirit in the Church should be relegated to mere remembrance and/or foreshadowing, but rather recognized as within the unfolding of God’s will in history. John Spence characterizes Balthasar’s position succinctly:

Von Balthasar has an understanding of history in which Jesus is truly both the beginning and the end.... Yet, there is history after Jesus. Jesus does not exist in time and place now as he did when the historical Jesus walked the earth with his disciples. If Jesus truly ushers in the eschaton, how is subsequent history to be understood? For von Balthasar, this history is the history of the Church. What has been won in Christ in history must be worked out for the rest of us in history too.

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This conflict necessitates a distinction between sacred and profane history in a way in which the former becomes the effective sign of God’s action in history and the sacramental means by which Christ brings about that transformation in history.42

Thus, for Balthasar, “The Church, transcending history but acting as its content and its nucleus, is the ultimate gift of the Creator to human history, given to bring its own realization from within.”43 To declare the resurrection to be historical, in the historically normative sense which Balthasar encourages us to consider, opens up a new horizon of appreciation of the life of the Church which, while it still “mourns in exile,” also participates in the “world to come.” The historical resurrection of Jesus means a genuinely historical life for the Church, which lives as the mystical body of the risen Jesus, and directs its prayers to God in expectation of God’s actual, present guidance, and not merely recapitulation of the past and/or orientation to an ethical “vanishing point.” That also means that, as hinted by Godzieba, Boeve, and Saracino, the Church’s present actions are not merely ephemeral reflections of the ideals of the reign of God, but the centre of humanity’s genuine participation in, and genuine incarnation of, that reign. In such a view the post-resurrection history of Jesus’ involvement in the Church by the Spirit is more than sign and symbol: it is the living, breathing, active inauguration of God’s reign. In such a view, the life of a disciple of Jesus is never truly lived in isolation from the instantiation of God’s reign in the Church. In such a view the Church’s actions


43 Balthasar, A Theology of History, 141.
matter, because they are, though riddled with sin and imperfection, the actions of God for the reign of God.

If in the resurrection of Jesus God affirmed the identity of Jesus as the Incarnate One, and the Incarnate One created the Church by the gift of his Spirit, this challenges any primitivist view—whether pietist or revisionist—that suggests God’s activity pro nobis in and through Jesus ended with the resurrection (and ascension). While fidelity to the earliest testimony to God’s saving action in Jesus represents a touchstone for contemporary faith, the presence of the living Christ, having been raised in our time and space, and still effective in our time and space, opens the door for the further unfolding of the full implications of the good news that was received by first-century hearers. Later proclamations of the Church in language that might have been perplexing to first-century Christians is not in principle excluded from legitimacy. If Jesus is yet present in the temporal life of the community formed around his resurrection, and not merely a datum of the past, then the development of doctrine and adaptation of Christian witness to new linguistic and cultural parameters is to be expected.

For those of us in the twenty-first century, this also implies a living, embodied continuity with the Church of previous centuries. We do not have the luxury of shaking our heads and disclaiming involvement in the difficult institutional history of the Church. In some instances, it may not be too strong to say that we hate what “we” have done, but the crusades were our crusades, the Inquisition was our Inquisition, the tolerance of oppression was our tolerance of oppression. On the other hand, neither do we have the luxury of shaking our heads and disclaiming inheritance of the piety and theology of the
Church. We will love some elements more than others, to be sure, but the practice of confession and penance is our practice, the theology of substitutionary atonement is our theology, and the reverence of the Virgin is our reverence. In most cases, we will need to ethically own our relationship to past errors and accomplishments before we will actually make the effort to understand and contextualize them, but we will be spiritually enriched for standing with our past rather than abstracting ourselves from it.

God and Historical Process

The declaration of the resurrection of Jesus to be historical makes a great deal of difference concerning God’s relationship to novelty. There have always been those who consider themselves to be followers of Jesus who do not work for social justice, who will not vote, and who consider withdrawal from the world to be the mark of true piety for all believers, whether these be first-century Gnostics or modern-day Plymouth Brethren. These conceive of the futurity of God’s reign as altogether beyond time, and the newness of the believer’s life in Christ as a quality that bears no relationship to temporal processes. This approach, as Boeve points out, can lend itself to an understanding of transcendence that leaves little ultimate meaning for the transformation of this present world with the participation of human agency. If Jesus’ resurrection is understood to be bodily and historical, although it transcends time and space in both agency and in import, it signals the possibility of God bringing about the truly novel to happen within our familiar dimensions.
John F. Haught confronts the tendency of Christian theology to remain tied to an Aristotelian *sub species aeterna* metaphysic that can make little sense of either genuine novelty or historical process. By themselves, theories of “Intelligent Design” cannot account for the overwhelming evidence of what seems to be—at least to human interpreters—vice as well as virtue in the existing order of creation; and by themselves, theories of “Creation Science” simply cannot account for the historical gap between the conceptualities of ancient literature and modern science, doing disservice to both. Rather, he lifts up what he considers to be the under-appreciated threefold scheme of creation found throughout the centuries of Christian theologizing: “Traditionally, Christian theology spoke of three dimensions of God’s creative activity: original creation (*creation originalis*), ongoing or continuous creation (*creation continua*), and new creation or the fulfillment of creation (*creation nova*).”44 There is room in Christian thought for the meaningfulness of God’s participation in the cosmic process between the “original” past and the eschaton.

In the traditional Christian metanarrative, God graced humanity with freedom, allowing for its imperfection and incompleteness and continuously calls humanity not simply back to a primordial innocence but to a new and better existence, in a freely-chosen relationship of love between created and Creator. Such a metanarrative suggests that “we should logically foresee, rather than be surprised, that God’s creation is not driven coercively, that it is widely experimental, and that if unfolds over the course of a

considerable amount of time.” Though this insight might threaten theology with a new captivity to a Whiteheadian rather than an Aristotelian metaphysic, “To those who object that process theology is hereby illegitimately redefining the idea of God’s power in order to contrive a fit with neo-Darwinian theory, the reply is simply that no other conception of power is more consistent with the quite orthodox religious belief that God is infinite love.”

Positing that there is freedom within all of nature to heed or deviate from God’s invitation to a higher synthesis of beauty may effectively alienate those who believe that the imperfect beauty of the natural world lies only in the incompleteness of our understanding; however, positing such freedom prescinds from the equally alienating analogy of God as the Divine Watchmaker, whose graceful machine reflects God’s intention in design but simultaneously precludes categorical novelty.

In a truly evolutionary theology, Haught says, “God’s empathy enfolds not just the human sphere but the whole of creation and this can mean only that the vast evolutionary odyssey, with all of its travail, enjoyment, and creativity, is also God’s own travail, enjoyment, and creativity.”

This conception of all elements of creation as possessing some graded degree of freedom construes the universe as “alive,” or “organic.” This may seem anthropomorphic, but is in fact no more anthropomorphic than talk of “selfish” genes by evolutionary scientists such as Richard Dawkins; in fact, “The explanatory success of Darwinian biology, Dawkins insinuates, has occurred because of,

\[\text{\textbf{\cite{45 Ibid., 42.}}}
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\[\text{\textbf{\cite{46 Ibid., 51.}}}
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not in spite of, its reliance on foggy but still illuminating metaphors such as ‘adaptation,’ ‘cooperation,’ ‘competition,’ ‘survival,’ and ‘selection.’”

Such a conception of creation seems to be consistent with the biblical emphasis on “the Living God,” in contrast with idols, who “have mouths, but do not speak; eyes but do not see” (Psalm 115:5). If the creation is in any way reflective of the Creator, perhaps its fundamentally animate character may be understood as theologically illuminating.

In the framework of Haught’s process-influenced theology, God’s agency within creation lay in selecting among possibilities and inviting each created element—whether that element is relatively fundamental or highly complex, generalized or highly localized—to respond to the divine call for its future. That future may largely resemble an element’s present, or it may represent a move toward increasing complexity or degradation for incorporation into another element. The more complex the element, the more freedom is being exercised in its act of self-consistence, and therefore the greater potential for its deviation from the Creator’s call. This call, in metaphysical terms, always comes from the future as envisioned by God—for whom the future is eternally present:

From the perspective of theology, in fact, it is the ‘coming of God’ in the mode of a renewing future that ultimately explains the novelty in evolution. Even though cosmic pessimism would view the random or contingent events that allow for evolutionary novelty as utterly devoid of meaning, to a biblically informed faith these indeterminancies are essential features of any universe open to new creation.

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47 Ibid., 90.

48 Ibid., 115.
Specifically Christian faith, says Haught, will not see novelty as “if it were simply the algorithmic unfolding of a fully deterministic past.” That is, it does not see the world’s process as simply reflecting what is eternally true, but values the world’s process with a historical realism that expects continuity with the past while allowing for the genuinely new.

Allowing for the genuinely new permits the comprehension of God’s redemption of creation as ingredient to the historical process. Haught goes so far as to suggest that within an evolutionary, process-oriented theology, we can rejoice that in Jesus’ death “God has put an end to the epoch of expiation.”\(^{49}\) Within this context, there is no ultimate theological impediment to construing Jesus’ historical, bodily resurrection as uniquely willed by God, and Jesus’ body as uniquely attuned to God’s call by the life of Jesus, the incarnate Son, as responding to that divine call. This would be the exceptional, self-revealing action of God, as spoken of in traditional Christian theology.

When it comes to eschatology, Haught speaks of our resurrection not as a re-emergence of our human, bodily existence, but rather in amorphic terms of “a deeper relationship to the cosmos occurring in our own death [that] would not be a distancing from, but a movement toward deeper intimacy with, an eternally embodied deity.”\(^{50}\) At this point it would be fair to ask whether or not, in order to preserve a Whiteheadian process metaphysic, Haught has now made the cosmic process, and a certain vision of

\(^{49}\) *Ibid.*, 142.

\(^{50}\) *Ibid.*, 162.
panentheism, rather than the particularity of God’s self-revelation in Jesus, the interpretative key to all reality. If Haught has done this, perhaps he has also identified the way out of this dilemma in citing Michael Polyani’s call to recognize the subjectivism in the universe: “The more [scientific thought] has idealized impersonal knowing, the more impersonal and subjectless the ‘real’ world itself has seemed to be. Hence we can conjecture that much of the resistance to Whitehead’s panexperientialism is prepared for at least remotely by the modern epistemological assumption that only impersonal knowing can be trusted.”51 Whether this is a defensible historical thesis or not, Polyani’s invitation could be taken to remind us of the Christian’s theological duty to acknowledge the inalienable subjectivity of God, whose vision for humankind may well be such that it cannot be completely incorporated within any particular metaphysical construct: such may be the nature of God’s infinite freedom and wisdom.

From a very different starting point, James Cone defends the freedom of God to choose what God’s involvement in the world will be, but is suspicious of the agenda involved in aligning the gospel with existing metaphysical frameworks. Rather, Cone upholds the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus from the historically particular vantage point of African-American oppression, insisting that the very framing of the “problem” of the relationship of faith and history is implicated in the desire of politically dominant oppressors in “defending the intellectual status of religious assertions against erosion by

51 Ibid., 180.
historical criticism." Cone argues that Jesus is properly construed as the successor to other historical liberators, such as Moses, and defenders of the oppressed, such as Daniel. It is from Jesus’ particularity that we construct our theology, rather than attempting to fit him into philosophically respectable frameworks:

“Jesus was not simply a nice fellow who happened to like the poor. Rather his actions have their origin in God’s eternal being. They represent a new vision of divine freedom, climaxed with the cross and resurrection, wherein God breaks into history for the liberation of slaves from societal oppression.”

However, Cone criticizes what he takes to be the complete historicization of the resurrection of Jesus by Pannenberg. Pannenberg, in Cone’s view, errs too far in the direction of Western academic respectability in conceding that present experience of Jesus cannot ultimately be conceptually safeguarded against being characterized as mere subjective illusion. Cone insists that it is the present experience of the Holy Spirit among Black Christians that functions not as the confirmation of theology, but as the starting point of theology. For Cone this is not an academic discussion of hermeneutics; this is the historical foundation of Black Christian hope:

Without the resurrection, Jesus was just a good man who suffered like other oppressed people. There is no reason to believe that God was with Jesus and thus defeated suffering unless Jesus transcended death and is alive and present in the struggle of freedom…. The resurrection, therefore, is God breaking into history and liberating the oppressed from their present suffering, thereby opening up humanity to a divine realization beyond history.


53 Ibid., 81.

54 Ibid., 175-176.
João Batista Libânio begins in the same place as Cone, in the experience of oppression, but seeks to universalize, though not rigidly systematize, the implications of the historical resurrection of Jesus. Libânio accounts for the utopian visions that are often held out by those who would liberate the oppressed by noting their usefulness and their limitations. Utopias criticize the present and offer an alternative; “Hope, however, grows in much more difficult and hostile ground. Its true origin is an impossible situation in human terms, one we cannot overcome by relying on our present potential and human strength, but only on God’s promises and power.”55 The reign of God is precisely that, God’s reign, and not ours, no matter how enlightened: that is why the resurrection—God’s specifically divine action—and no merely historical vision, is the ultimate direction of Christian hope. For Libânio, the resurrection of Jesus is not simply an elevation of optimism or the historical inevitability of progress, but in the particular context of the historical Jesus, the man of Nazareth who brought a particular vision of God’s reign, the resurrection is God’s swearing by God’s own divine faithfulness that there is a telos to our human existence:

Jesus’ resurrection is the prototype, precursor, and anticipation of all resurrections. In it the end of history has already happened. It also shows that only those who give their lives for their brothers and sisters rise again. Lastly, it is the ultimate key to all revelation. The last word on history has already been said. No human power, no dictator, no ruling power will decide the final destiny of the poor. God’s love raised Jesus and will raise all those he loves and who love him. Among these the poor have first place.56


56 Ibid., 289.
Richard Hardy describes the Christian hope for the oppressed by focussing on similarities among Basic Ecclesial Communities in Latin America and Asia. Describing how “immense suffering” is the basic life experience for the vast majority of people in Latin America, Hardy notes that “while some might think that this is a situation which would crush people and contribute to an other-worldly spirituality, it has in fact produced the opposite effect.”\(^{57}\) Out of the experience of suffering, Christians in poverty have banded together for the practical welfare of one another. The “Spanish colonizers” brought with them an emphasis on the crucifixion, but this has begun to be replaced by an emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus: “Now hope plunges one into the fray for total human development, the meaning of salvation by Christ in his life, death, and resurrection.” To these believers, “That anyone is condemned forever to less than what is essential for a human existence is totally against the new creation, which Jesus brings in time, in flesh, and in blood.”\(^{58}\) The awareness that “Jesus lives and works among them here and now” is rooted in their belief that Jesus was raised within the same history in which they live: as Choan-Seng Song writes, “Faith in Jesus Christ is a historical faith. It is a faith which not only touches heaven but also moves the earth.”\(^{59}\) The resurrection in our time and space is the promise of God for our time and space.

For Moltmann, discussion of the resurrection and eschatology are inseparable. To speak of one is, in principle, to speak of the other. If the resurrection is not a mere,


isolated “fact” of history, and if the resurrection has transformed the “parade of the past” into an open-ended eschatological process of anticipation, then we should expect the resurrection to affect history heuristically as we move toward God’s intended future.

Moltmann says:

The coming Lordship of the risen Christ cannot be merely hoped for and awaited. This hope and expectation also sets its stamp on life, action and suffering in the history of society. Hence mission means not merely propagation of faith and hope, but also historic transformation of life. The life of the body, including also social and public life, is expected as a sacrifice in day-to-day obedience (Rom. 12:1ff.).

This is what Moltmann calls “liberation through conversion.” This conversion is an anticipation of the new life of God’s kingdom under the conditions of this world. As conversion to God’s kingdom, it cannot be a private or a purely “spiritual” matter, and must involve the totality of one’s life, in all of one’s relationships and responsibilities. According to Möltmann, this was the experience of the first followers of Jesus: they were liberated from their prejudices, their fears, and even the necessity of individual possessions.

Richard Bauckham characterizes Moltmann’s understanding of the significance of the resurrection of Jesus in terms of God’s sensitivity to human suffering. For Moltmann, the resurrection acts as theodicy. Inasmuch as God has, in the historical resurrection of the Jesus, guaranteed the redemption of human history, “the resurrection of Jesus may not function as a substitute for action in the present, but rather motivates and directs action in

60 Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 330.
pursuit of righteousness now.”\textsuperscript{61} The resurrection also acts as \textit{theological hermeneutic}. Inasmuch as the modern experience of reality is one in which God is absent, “The fact that the resurrection does not correspond to the modern experience of reality is... a crucial theological advantage.... Only the God of resurrection can successfully challenge the modern experience of the death of God.”\textsuperscript{62} And the resurrection also acts as \textit{the vision of the Church}. Inasmuch as the resurrection is an action of true and ultimate transformation, “in this way believers in the promise are liberated from accommodation to the present state of things and set critically against it.”\textsuperscript{63}

While Moltmann resists the idea that the resurrection of Jesus is susceptible to historical \textit{proof} given the limitations of historical method, his insistence on the historical efficacy of the resurrection impels his theology of Christian mission—a “first world” version, perhaps, of what theologians who take the perspective of the oppressed understand principally from their lived-out experience of Christian community. The difference between Haught’s evolutionary vision and the sometimes revolutionary vision of those called “liberation” theologians may often be a matter of degree and contextualization rather than a fundamental difference in theological source or method. However, for liberation theologians, and for Moltmann, it is the \textit{eschatological} significance of Jesus’ resurrection that is more in play than for Haught; for these theologians, the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus offers \textit{historical}, and not simply


\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.}, 207.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid.}, 208.
cosmic, hope in their circumstances, namely the proclamation that God does in fact journey with creation towards its fulfillment.

God and Human Telos

The declaration of the resurrection to be historical makes a great deal of difference as to how we understand human destiny. A purely metaphorical theology, such as that of Sallie McFague, would invite us to limit ourselves to employing the resurrection as symbolic of the perennial structures of life, and ignore the question of historicity. A highly structuralist approach, such as that of Amy-Jill Levine, would limit us to understanding the theology of the New Testament authors, without recourse to knowledge of actual historical events. If Jesus’ resurrection is understood to be bodily and historical, however, it could be regarded as indicative of God’s historical intentions for humanity and for creation.

Sheila Greeve Davaney reflects on the meaning of declaring anything to be historical, but does so in the context of theological construction. She traces how “historicism,” the relativizing effect of acknowledging all historiography to be conditioned by the historian’s situation, has become the assumption regarding all reflective disciplines—history, theology, and philosophy among them—in the Western world in the modern era: “One of historicism’s major claims is that ideas are not just


abstractions. They do not just emerge out of thin air but are deeply intertwined with the contexts within which they take shape; they are responses to, reflections of, and, in turn, conditioners of those contexts. With the inclusion of historicism as ingredient to theology, all absolute, universal statements, along with the assumptions they are based on, are inherently questionable, and for the most part reducible to the social and intellectual milieu during which they arose.

Davaney follows the development of historicism through Ranke, who may have believed that if Christian faith was abandoned, the result would be moral anarchy, and comments that “[i]t was precisely this threat that was to lead to the crisis of historicism that marked the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.” Davaney appreciatively points to Schleiermacher as having already anticipated this development for theology as he reframed it as a matter of how people speak about themselves and their sense of direction in life, rather than facts and entities external to themselves. Davaney further applauds H. Richard Niebuhr’s description of polytheism, henotheism, and radical monotheism as a milestone on the way to a thoroughgoing historicism. She acknowledges the historicist implications in liberation theology as well: “The location of the theologian, in all its particularity, thus became a defining element in understanding and evaluating claims to theological validity even if those who utilized it to criticize others often failed to maintain the relativizing and historicizing implications


67 Ibid., 30.
of the turn to particularity in relation to their own claims.\textsuperscript{68} She is critical of George Lindbeck, though, whose central proposal in \textit{The Nature of Doctrine}\textsuperscript{69} assumes rather than demonstrates that there is an enduring “grammar”—the internal logic—of religions. In the end, Davaney calls for a thoroughgoing historicist pragmatism, and understands the radical implications of what she is proposing:

But the form of historicism articulated here suggests a particular interpretation of the theological task. It suggests, in particular, that theology is a second-order discourse whose attention is directed at the beliefs and practices of historical communities. As such, it might best be characterized as a form of cultural analysis and criticism that is distinguished from other cultural discourses by virtue of its concern with those human formations we are designating religions or similar cultural configuration that give meaning and direction to human existence.\textsuperscript{70}

Davaney’s direction really abolishes theology as it has been practiced in Christian circles, equating it with religious studies. It concedes the ground of ultimacy for religious language, and makes any discussion of theological entailments of religiously-significant historical events in a realist vein moot. However, Davaney’s historicist challenge to traditional Christian theology cannot be simply ignored. It needs to be admitted that, in traditional theology, such theological entailments of posited religiously-significant historical events were considered to have extrinsic reference, and were dependent to some degree on available conceptualities. The ascension has long been an example of this held up by historicists: the image provided by Luke that Jesus went “up” into heaven is dependent on the conceptuality of a three-tiered universe, with heaven above, hell below,

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 131.

\textsuperscript{69} George Lindbeck, \textit{The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age} (Louisville, KY: WestminsterJohnKnox, 1984).

\textsuperscript{70} Sheila Greeve Davaney, \textit{Historicism}, 161.
and earth in-between. As with Craffert’s proposal above, we must at least acknowledge the possibility and perhaps even the necessity that certain ancient conceptualities had a hand in shaping the understanding of the resurrection of Jesus to the first generation of witnesses.

I would argue, however, that this acknowledgement is not the same thing as denying the possibility of extrinsic reference for all theological statements, or any other kind of referential statements. Those theories of physics which infer the existence of such forces as gravity, or such phenomena as black holes (like God, in principle directly unobservable), may also be considered relativized by the social and intellectual milieus from which they emerge; in some respects, inasmuch as any new conceptualities emerge dependent at least in part on available languages, symbolic references, and even metanarratives, this must be true. *Pace* Padgett’s conclusions noted in the previous chapter, it should be no particular embarrassment that both historical and theological insights are conditioned by their historically emergent mode of expression, so long as we allow them the same possibility of external referent as is allowed in other disciplines.

To declare the resurrection of Jesus to be historical is to affirm God’s action in the historical process in the context of first-century Judaism. The cultural context in which the resurrection took place, with its conceptualization of life, death, and resurrection, is what in fact causes us to take the testimony of the first witnesses as referring to *resurrection* rather than resuscitation, revivification, or hallucination. On the one hand, without this context, the resurrection could be interpreted as a timeless myth of the perennial endurance of hope, and at that might have heuristic value. On the other hand, to
appreciate its historical context, and confess the historically-conditioned nature of the categories in which the resurrection was first proclaimed, is to allow the resurrection to have a far more important impact. To declare that the resurrection as resurrection could only have happened in certain contexts, and in fact did happen then-and-there “in the fullness of time,” is not to make it irrelevant but rather to allow it to be real, and effectively transform our understanding of reality.

Indeed, after the postmodern challenge to modern historiography, a kind of “soft” form of historicism must be ingredient to theological reflection on historical events. An example of this re-conditioning of theological claims by at least a soft form of historicism is the changing emphases within Christian soteriology. Martha Schull Gillis admits that her place in history as a twenty-first century, Reformed, and feminist theologian all come into play in her appreciation of the resurrection in her understanding of Christian soteriology. Saying that she wishes “to reinterpret Reformed emphases on satisfaction and substitution rather than abandon them” because of her social location, she nevertheless asserts that “Abelard’s insight into the transforming power of God’s love as continuous through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection has to be retained in my Reformed feminist account. His account is valuable because it pays attention to how the doctrine of the atonement ought to function in Christian life.”71 Gillis considers the atonement to be a gift of divine love and the sign of our healing—because of the resurrection. It needs to be said, though, that while Gillis’ self-awareness may epitomize

Davaney’s historicist ethic, Gillis remains within the Reformed tradition, and retains her feminist emphases, because she freely chooses to do so. Her synthesis is not predicated solely on her social location: Gillis is being creative within her social location.

This is not such an isolated example. For instance, we may grant that N.T. Wright is probably correct when he identifies the Christus victor motif as the dominant soteriological theme in the New Testament; in an era of political oppression, the heralding of Jesus overcoming “powers and principalities” was existentially, if not politically, liberating. However, it exists alongside other themes in the New Testament, including those later highlighted by Anselm and Abelard; within the given context, there was variety and choice. It is further illustrative to note that those other principal motifs, inherited and highlighted by Reformation theology, were developed by contemporaries in similar social conditions. The proliferation of soteriologies in the twentieth century, even within the Western academy, further suggests that sociological and intellectual milieus, while they may be restrictive, are not determinative of theological outcomes.

The question at hand, namely, the declaration of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, furnishes another example. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza uses a feminist hermeneutic to maintain the intention to claim historicity for the resurrection of Jesus made by the first witnesses, the women coming upon the empty tomb on the third day after Jesus’ crucifixion. Schüssler-Fiorenza challenges the “malestream” scholarly consensus that these accounts were later fabrications, declaring that “feminist historical reconstruction must begin with the assumption of women’s presence and agency rather than with the preconstructed kyriarchal discourse of women’s marginality and
victimization.” As other scholars have, she accepts the existence of a “Petrine” tradition in regards to the resurrection of Jesus, but does not allow the subsequent marginalization of the women’s testimony, holding up the “Magdalenian” tradition as of equal historical value with the Petrine tradition: “The author of Matthew probably wants to make sure that resurrection is not misread in a platonic fashion to mean simply a vision of the Living One. In this way s/he attempts to safeguard the experience of the women that ‘Jesus was vindicated and not left in death’ against a platonic or docetic ‘supernatural’ misreading.” Schüssler-Fiorenza’s feminist hermeneutic leads her to the conclusion that the earliest testimonies to the resurrection of Jesus were meant to depict a bodily, historical resurrection. The women’s testimony was not a literary add-on, or a peculiar historical accident, but the heart of the gospel itself: “The empty tomb does not signify absence but presence: it announces the Resurrected One’s presence on the road ahead, in a particular space of struggle and recognition such as Galilee. The Resurrected One is present in the ‘little ones,’ in the struggles for survival of those impoverished, hungry, imprisoned, tortured, and killed, in the wretched of the earth.”

Schüssler-Fiorenza’s conclusion regarding the historicity of the resurrection can be contrasted with that of fellow feminist New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, whose conclusions are noted above. The variety of opinions among twentieth-century New Testament scholars is something that Levine herself remarks on:


73 Ibid., 123.

74 Ibid., 126.
Feminist readers of Christian origins are so diverse in terms of approach (literary, historical, sociological, text-critical, ideological, cross-cultural…), identity (Womanist, Latina, African, Evangelical, lesbian, Jewish, Catholic,…) and conclusions—namely, it is just like most biblical studies and indeed like most academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences—that any single definition of what constitutes a ‘feminist reading’ is necessarily reified.  

While Davaney has contributed to the discussion of the development of historicism, it would be debilitating to theology to absolutize the relativizing effects of historicism and insist that religiously-significant accounts cannot have historical referents with potentially theological implications.

Pannenberg is aware of the kind of concern raised by Davaney, namely, that any object of historical inquiry “reveals itself only within a universal context of events and meaning, only in terms of a universal history, which also embraces the era of the investigator.” In fact, Pannenberg goes so far as to say that “historiography is constantly guided by an interest in the present.” The “pastness” of the past is to be preserved, however, since the present perspective cannot be all-sufficient for understanding the past. For Pannenberg, truth is essentially historical, inasmuch as all inquiry into truth is ultimately sought within a posited framework of universal history. For Pannenberg, the “end” of universal history has been revealed in the resurrection of Jesus. Pannenberg believes that the consistency of Jesus’ words and actions, when taken together with the

75 A Feminist Companion to Matthew, 14.


77 Ibid., 127.
“reasonably certain” historicity of his resurrection, reveals to the inquirer who is willing to accept the proleptic nature of Jesus’ resurrection that the resurrected Jesus is the ultimate revelation of our future:

There is no substantial or structural continuity from the old to the new existence. On the other hand, however, the transformation will occur to the same earthly body that we are here: something different will not be produced in its place, but there is a historical continuity in the sense of continuous transition in the consummation of the transformation itself. The expression ‘historical continuity’ here means only that connection between the beginning and the end point which resides in the process of transformation itself, regardless of how radically this process may be conceived.\textsuperscript{78}

For Pannenberg, there is an identity in kind between Jesus’ resurrected humanity and our resurrected humanity. Inasmuch as he uses the language of transformation, he seems to be in agreement with N.T. Wright, Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza, and others that cite the New Testament accounts as testifying to resurrection as a continuation of personal identity within a framework of altered capacities. The hope of resurrection that Jesus himself testified to was the Jewish hope of \textit{continued personal history} within a \textit{continued collective history}. In raising Jesus, God places ultimate value on all historical being.

Pannenberg’s understanding of resurrection as transformation not only allows but demands a respect for historical being: our faith is not isolated in ideas or concepts, and much less in an escapism that emphasizes only the after-life. For those declaring the resurrection of Jesus to be historical, the after-life is in fact related to the life we live here-and-now. While its ethical structures will undergo many surprising reversals as

indicated in Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God, resurrection life will involve personal responsibility, personal relationships, and personal joy, and their true antecedents will be our exercise of our persons and the stewardship of God’s gifts in our present lives. Both the Jewish and Christian scriptures refer to the creation as imperfect, and yet as God’s gift for us to exercise stewardship over. From the early testimonies to the resurrection of Jesus, we infer that resurrection life is to be a life of continued embodiment. Pannenberg’s dual emphasis on the proleptic nature of Jesus’ resurrection and the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection offers us a vision of truly—and greater—human existence. In resurrection, Jesus speaks, shares food, and genuinely cares for others: our present respect for others and for creation shapes our destiny into the resurrection life: “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance” (Matthew 25:29). While the secular ecologist may well understand the need for exercising good stewardship of the natural world for the sake of future generations, the Christian adds to this motivation the desire to please God by promoting the best interests of creation as a lived-out, forever-embodied hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Creator, and to anticipate the enjoyment of human destiny as far as possible in this “first life,” assured that God’s promises will be fulfilled, and that “they shall all sit beneath their own vines and their own fig tree” (Micah 4:4).

Conclusion

The New Testament plainly and consistently depicts the resurrection of Jesus as an event whose subject is the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. Although the data
culled from the New Testament records is incomplete and not completely coherent in our categories, the data are presented in a narrative structure: they present a before-and-after sequence that involves a set amount of time and an observable change-within-continuity that we have come to expect from any standard description of an event of any kind. Since this structure involves a person of historical significance, the reconstructed narrative must be regarded as bearing some claim to historicity. Appreciating the rootedness of Christian origins in first-century Judaism helps us to comprehend how the first witnesses believed that they had seen, in the resurrection of Jesus, God’s hand at work in their present, believing that the fate of their Master bore profound eschatological implications. Given the very early defence of the eventfulness of the resurrection by Paul, and the development of specifically narrative literature within the lifetimes of the first believers, it seems that the New Testament documents, taken together as our best sources of information, would support the very early development of the dynamic discerned by (as he then was) Joseph Ratzinger: “The factum historicum (historical fact) is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical faith, but the foundation on which it stands.... If we push this aside, Christian faith as such disappears and is recast as some other religion.”79

Yet, the method by which we posit something as unexpected as the resurrection of Jesus to be historical is rightfully called into question. Historical method is dependent in part on the metaphysical assumptions it employs. The resurrection of Jesus cannot be

79 Joseph Ratzinger, Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration (Toronto: Doubleday, 2007), xv.
declared historical by any historical method that would systematically exclude the miraculous or divine agency. The overzealous application of the principle of analogy in nineteenth and twentieth-century historical method, described ably by Troeltsch, supported by the growing appreciation for the large-scale predictability of the natural world, exacerbated the growing cleavage between theology and “historical science.” In fact, it was the desire of many of those practicing the discipline of history to have their discipline recognized as a science rather than an art—with the former being regarded as methodically more rigorous, and perhaps intellectually superior—that drove many religious historians, and theologians with them, to the systematic denial of the miraculous.

In some respects it was the postmodernist movement that permitted the hegemony of the practice of science to come into question. Under careful scrutiny, it became clear that all purportedly “neutral” scientific endeavours—historiography among them—were influenced by considerations such as wealth, status, gender and ethnic bias, and basic metaphysical assumptions. Through the latter part of the twentieth century, historians debated both the nature and the goal of their researches, and the debates came close to neutralizing historical efforts in a bath of relativism. Historians, somewhat chastened, have continued their pursuits in a self-critical kind of realism, creating a kind of post-postmodern awareness that methodological considerations must be named as part of any historical inquiry, while presuming that historical inquiry still has meaning. Recently, New Testament scholars have begun to join them in this practice.
Whatever the results of such self-identifying historical inquiries into the historical claims of the New Testament documents regarding the resurrection of Jesus, it is certainly possible and necessary to distinguish the results of that historical inquiry from the potential theological claims that these results might support. While certain metaphysical assumptions must be named in order to allow for the possibility of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, yet other theological, historical, and metaphysical assumptions (e.g., the centrality of Israel in God’s plans, the accuracy of the Gospels’ depiction of Jesus’ self-understanding, even the preferability of life over death) must be admitted if one were to draw out the theological significance of that resurrection. Within the larger body of Christian theology, the symbolic value, and hence the theological implications of the resurrection depends a great deal on whether or not one considers the resurrection to be a historical event. If the resurrection is a historical event, the dimension of historicity has the potential to change the nature and value of the resurrection of Jesus as a theological datum.

Prior to determining whether or not, or just how, the dimension of the historicity might alter the theological significance of the resurrection, it seems worthy to determine whether or not, or just how, the resurrection might be declared to be historical. It seems fruitful to suggest that some “post-postmodern” form of historiography would yield the most intelligible results to a twenty-first century, Westernized interpreter. It seems defensible, within the Christian theological enterprise, to assert that the metaphysical assumptions of such an inquiry would have to allow for the accessibility of our world of time and space to God’s agency, and that God’s agency be discerned from the
resurrection event itself, in the context of other admitted claims regarding God’s agency (e.g., creation, special revelation, prophetic inspiration, etc.). It seems defensible to assert that the New Testament documents are the best sources of historical information regarding the resurrection of Jesus, and that their theologically-involved nature does not in and of itself disqualify themselves from being regarded as potential historical evidence. It seems defensible to assert that the New Testament documents testify that the resurrection of Jesus, while categorically unique, is to be construed as presenting as a singular historical event the bodily resurrection of the particular Jesus of Nazareth on the third day after his crucifixion. And, if all of these admissions are made, and the resurrection of Jesus is, on consideration of the evidence, declared to be historical, it seems defensible to assert that the resurrection of Jesus is no mere accident of history, but has profound theological implications.


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