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CHAPTER

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21 The Historical Jesus and Christology from David Friedrich Strauss to Käsemann

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Abstract

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen significant effort invested in historical-critical reconstruction of the portrait of the figure of Jesus. Tracing the progress of these endeavours concisely from the leading contributions of D. F. Strauss, Adolf von Harnack, and Ernst Troeltsch, through the critical rejoinders offered by Martin Kähler, Wilhelm Herrmann, and Rudolf Bultmann, and on to the subsequent second 'quest' inaugurated by Ernst Käsemann, consideration is given to the complex and evolving relations between this conversation and doctrinal Christology. The chapter considers the long-term implications of the nineteenth-century separation of the so-called 'Jesus of history' from the so-called 'Christ of faith,' noting in particular the impact of this supposed gulf on ecclesiology.

Keywords: Christology, D. F. Strauss, Adolf von Harnack, Ernst Troeltsch, Martin Kähler, Wilhelm Herrmann, Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann

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Introduction

CHRISTOLOGY is the discursive expansion of the evangelical confession of the identity of Jesus as the Christ of God. It seeks to elucidate the meaning, basis, and entailments of this confession and to bring these insights to bear upon the understanding and ordering of all other aspects of Christian faith, thought, and practice. In this task, the New Testament witness to the identity of the man Jesus of Nazareth has ever played a central part. Beginning in the late eighteenth century a new and distinctly modern problem arose with respect to the role of the New Testament witness generally, and the Gospels in particular, in the business of Christology. The diversity of biblical portraits of Jesus assumed a new and different significance in view of modern historical critical study of the origins of the New Testament, research which cared little for their presumptive supernatural origin and canonical unity. The problem of the 'historical Jesus' and the unsettled question of its significance for Christology are abiding legacies of the rise and development of historical criticism of the Bible over the last two centuries.

p. 329 By the start of the nineteenth century, Enlightenment philosophies had long been raising searching questions about the intelligibility of ancient Christological dogma. The contingency and historically parochial character of Christian claims were criticized by thinkers like Lessing and Kant who argued that deductive rationality and universal accessibility were necessary marks of any religious claims worthy of the allegiance of modern women and men. The religious and moral value of the historical per se was assailed. Christological doctrines were rendered further suspect by the role they were said to play in the ideological mystifications of ecclesiastical priest-craft against which the emerging natural and human sciences and associated political cultures set their face. Traditionalist authority and the dehumanizing consequences of the invocation of ideas of the supernatural and the miraculous suffered sustained attacks in the work of figures like Hume, Rousseau, and again, Kant. The traditional figure of Jesus Christ stood precisely at the intersection of these two lines of modern critique: the incarnate Son of God—*vere deus et vere homo*—a figure at once miraculous and historical, contingent and supernatural, now doubly dubious.

Already a node of critical pressure on conceptual grounds then, the emergence of historical criticism of the Gospels themselves opened up the prospect that the canonical portrait of Christ—together with the doctrines which depended upon it—were not only an unfit vehicle for the 'necessary truths of reason' as had previously been worried, but were also seriously deficient even as regards the 'accidental truths of history' (Lessing 1972: 53). Reimarus' *ad hominem* dismissal of Jesus' disciples as self-serving fabricators proved typical in the questions raised, if not in the answers ventured. His *Fragments* staked the essential methodological claim that the Church's dogmatic account of its Scriptures be supplanted by a *naturalistic* one, and 'announced all the *motifs* of the future historical treatment of the life of Jesus' (Schweitzer 1968: 26). The subsequent 'quest of the historical Jesus' concentrated scholarly attention throughout the nineteenth century on the question of just what could be known of Jesus of Nazareth by means of historical science. The humanity of Jesus Christ became a pivot point of theological debate during this entire period (Welch 1965: 8).

While the motivations and aims of scholars varied, matters of Christological importance were inevitably at stake. For some, the aim of such research was a better orthodoxy: by insisting that future Christology would be marked by 'a full and unreserved recognition of His human nature as "*homo-ousios*" with our own', the unprecedented emphasis on understanding the humanity of Christ promised to correct deep seated monophysite reflexes in the tradition that effectively discounted the significance of the reality of the life Jesus lived (Baillie 1948: 10). The flourishing of *kenotic* Christology in this period is also indicative of this emphasis. In this movement the humanity of the man Jesus—understood as an autonomous willing subject and agent and, crucially, a historically developing personality—exercised a defining constraint upon Christology. Theologians working in this vein asked, 'How ought we to re-conceive of the nature of divinity in Christ given the incontrovertible integrity of his human nature and existence?' That someone like Thomasius was willing to

run the risk of reducing the meaning of ‘incarnation’ to something like ‘theophany’ (Baillie 1948: 96) in deference to the integrity of Jesus’ humanity indicates how seriously the matter had come to be taken.

Other scholars pursued the more radical and revisionist aim of unearthing the ‘real’ historical figure of Jesus purportedly buried beneath centuries of Christian piety and the obfuscations of ecclesiastical dogma. While for some this could be a work of progressive piety, for others it was an exercise in scientific *sang-froid* that undermined both theological dogmatism and the passions of the pious imagination. David Friedrich Strauss was one of the most influential of these ‘anti-dogmatists’.

David Friedrich Strauss

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Strauss’ *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* first appeared in 1835, a ‘spark by which the long-accumulated fuel burst into bright flame’ as F. C. Baur remarked (Strauss 1977: xxvi). Forswearing both supernaturalist and rationalist defences of the historical character of the events attested in the Gospels, Strauss proposes a *mythical* reading of the accounts of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection. ‘Myth’ is a heuristic category by means of which Strauss purports to identify and explain the fictitious elements in the Gospel stories. To designate something as mythical is not to cast it as a conscious fabrication or authorial deception. Strauss proposes that features of the Gospel narratives which *prima facie* are unhistorical—because they (negatively) break the known laws of nature, causality, human psychology, or are self-contradictory, or (positively) are poetical, trade in prevalent religious ideas, or reflect narrative conventions—are to be explained on the basis of the shared cultural consciousness out of which they grew. To categorize such unhistorical elements in the Gospel as ‘myths’ is to understand them as the imaginative products of ‘unconscious folk poeticizing’ which give voice not so much to the mind of any one individual author, as to the consciousness of a whole religious culture (Frei 1985: 235). Without denying that the Gospels may contain some historical facts despite themselves, Strauss adjudged that most of the Gospel texts were mythical in this sense, expressions of the *social imaginary* of the religious world in which the New Testament was composed. As such they were largely disqualified as sources of *historical* information about Jesus. What Strauss says of one passage may be extended to his view of the whole: the Gospels offer up ‘no particular fact in the life of Jesus, but only a new proof of how strong was the impression of his messiahship left by Jesus on the minds of his contemporaries’ (Strauss 1973: 177). The overall effect of such a mythical reading is, as Strauss saw it, to ‘have apparently annihilated the greatest and most valuable part of that which the Christian has been wont to believe concerning his Saviour Jesus, have uprooted all the animating motives which he has gathered from his faith, and withered all his consolations’ (Strauss 1973: 757).

Nevertheless, the *Life of Jesus* ended with a ‘concluding dissertation’ in which Strauss surprisingly angles ‘to re-establish dogmatically that which has been destroyed critically’ in such a way as to show that ‘the dogmatic significance of the life of Jesus remains inviolate’ (Strauss 1973: 757, lii). This trick—in which Strauss himself soon lost confidence—draws heavily on aspects of Hegel’s speculative philosophy of religion. Strauss argues that historical criticism renders untenable traditional doctrines of Christ in which absolute significance was ‘annexed to the person and history of one individual’. Yet the Christological *idea* might still be salvaged if its object were no longer taken to be the single man Jesus, but rather the human race as such wherein are resolved the many contradictions predicated of ‘the Christ’ (Strauss 1973: 780). Like Feuerbach, Strauss suggests that anthropology provides the secret key to the rational meaning of Christology: the future of Christology can be secured by its transposition into a poetics of human self-description. When Strauss later abandoned the attempt to salvage Christological doctrine philosophically, he concluded more simply that ‘the critical investigation of the life of Jesus is the test of the dogma of the person of Christ’ (Strauss 1977: 5), a test which traditional Christology could not pass. To the extent that Christological doctrines traded upon the factuality of the Gospels—claims Strauss felt he had demonstrated *in fine* to be almost entirely mythical and so unhistorical—those doctrines were fatally compromised. Even in his most mature work, he deployed the category of myth to a single, rigidly critical end and did not exploit other possibilities it might have afforded (beyond the

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Hegelian conceit) as a ‘potentially rich hermeneutical device’ for Christological reconstruction or reinterpretation (Frei 1985: 242).

What Strauss accomplished shaped subsequent debates surrounding the Christological significance of the question of the historical Jesus. Two divergent paths opened up from this juncture. The first option was to admit the materially decisive connection between the Jesus of critical history and the Christ of Christian faith such that the deliverances of historical scholarship bore more or less directly on the tenability of Christological claims. Both revisionist and conservative possibilities exist along this route: one could continue to argue, like Strauss, that critical scholarship delivered negligible historical knowledge and no surety concerning the man Jesus, and that what little it did establish undermined, rather than buttressed, the claims of classical Christology. Alternately, one could contend that critical research could deliver up a wide and defensible core of historical facts upon which renewed understandings of these same Christological doctrines could in fact be sustained. The story Albert Schweitzer tells in the latter half of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* is largely that of the extensive exploration of these possibilities up to the turn of the twentieth century. Below we will briefly consider the positions of von Harnack and Troeltsch as influential examples of the constructive wing of this line of development.

The second option after Strauss was to contest the claim that there is a materially significant connection between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Christian faith, and to argue instead that historians’ reconstructions should have no bearing on faith’s grasp—and theology’s conception—of the identity of Christ the Saviour. The various considerations adduced in support of this view distil into arguments for the *historical impossibility* of attaining to the ‘real’ Jesus by *wissenschaftliche* means, and the *theological illegitimacy* of appealing to reconstructions of the historical Jesus ‘behind’ the scriptural portrait as a source and norm for Christological doctrine or as the proper object of Christian faith. We will look to the work of Kähler, Herrmann, and Bultmann for articulations of these contentions.

The Necessity of the Historical Jesus for Modern Christology

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Maurice Wiles remarked that even as it undermined traditional doctrine, historical criticism has ‘the potential to bring new life to the figure of Jesus for Christian experience in our own times’ (Wiles 1979: 22). The first trajectory we can trace beyond Strauss ↵ seized upon this possibility. Despite Strauss’ limited yield, the continued application of the tools of historical discovery, it was wagered, could deliver an intellectually credible and religiously vibrant portrait of Jesus of Nazareth unfettered from the ‘stony rocks of ecclesiastical doctrine’ (Schweitzer 1968: 399). As befits the methods and fascinations of the age, portraits produced in this mode emphasized the inner motivations, natural psychological development, and moral character of Jesus. They aimed to convey a complete impression of him as a powerful personality, a man of compelling religious genius. In this they owed less to Strauss than to Schleiermacher, whose posthumously published *Life of Jesus* advocated for the central place of Jesus’ supreme God-consciousness in accounting for his person and actions. Ernst Renan’s infamous, if less technical, contribution to the genre is not atypical with its combination of critical historical observation and rhapsodic commendation of the ‘great soul’ of Jesus: even his ignorance and mistaken worldview—namely, his exaggerated belief in God’s concern for humanity and reliance upon special providence—are but ‘beautiful errors’ that have proved and remain ‘the secret of his power’ (Renan 1864: 60). The power of Jesus to save was reconceived on such terms as that of an exemplary human existence controlled by a pure and profound moral-religious vision. Talk of the divine translates into talk of the sublime; talk of the condescension of God into talk of human ascent to greatness: ‘Let us place, then, the person of Jesus at the highest summit of human greatness’ (Renan 1864: 305). Such studies could be accused of trafficking in accounts of the man Jesus more persuasively *ideal* than historically real; their ideality actually standing surrogate for displaced deity. When they sought to correct for this, later practitioners of this biographical art ‘at its height’ would reaffirm and intensify—rather than leave off—its overarching aim and techniques.

Adolf Von Harnack

In a famous exchange of public letters in 1923, Harnack scorned as irresponsible Karl Barth's suggestion that the Christ of faith could be known *otherwise* than as the historical person of Jesus whose identity was available to objective scholarly investigation. He asked rhetorically, 'If the person of Christ stands at the centre of the gospel, how else can the basis for reliable and communal knowledge of this person be gained but through critical-historical study so that an imagined Christ is not put in place of the real one?' To deny this would lay Christology open to 'every suitable fantasy and to every theological dictatorship which dissolves the historical ingredient of our religion' (Rumscheidt 1972: 31, 39). On Harnack's view, commitment to historical scholarship is no alien imposition but arises from the substance of Christian faith itself: 'as this religion teaches that God can only be truly known in Jesus Christ, it is inseparable from historical knowledge' (Harnack 1989: 108). To confess that Jesus Christ was *vere homo* licenses and demands scientific investigation of his individual personality and character in its contingent historical context.

p. 333 Harnack explains that Jesus, as anyone, 'can think, speak, and do absolutely nothing at all in which his peculiar disposition and his own age are not coefficients' (Harnack 1989: 82–3). Only the historian can win objective access to these essential 'coefficients', rationally sifting out the kernel of reality from the husks of ancient testimony with its prophecy, mythology, and miracle. Harnack's own work portrays Jesus once again as a supreme religious personality, 'a man who has rest and peace for his soul, and is able to life and strength to others' because 'his gaze penetrated the veil of the earthly, and he recognised everywhere the hand of the living God' (Harnack 1901: 37–8). Jesus' identity is fused with the teaching at the heart of the religion he founds: the universal governance and benevolence of God, the supreme value of the human soul, and the summons to a higher morality motivated by love. We must rely upon the best deliverances of historical science if Christian faith and theology are to be delivered from the caprice of subjective piety and the unwarranted scepticism of faithless *Wissenschaft*. Harnack's conclusion is clear: historical Jesuology can and must provide the entire substance of any credible modern Christology, transforming the latter radically indeed.

Ernst Troeltsch

Ernst Troeltsch elaborated a further defence of the necessity of the historical Jesus for a vital modern Christian faith (Troeltsch 1990: 183ff.). The intelligibility of classical Christological dogma disintegrated under the assaults of historical criticism such that the 'eternal, timeless, unconditioned and supra-historical' Christ of the ancient faith bears no real relation to the 'finite and conditioned' portrait of Jesus now firmly set back into history by modern scholarship. In view of the progressively more 'devastating answers' returned to the question of our historical knowledge of Jesus, continued embrace of classical Christology becomes obscurantist, intellectually dishonest, and Christianly irresponsible. It is irresponsible because it alienates present-day Christianity from any credible portrait of the one who is and must remain the centre and 'rallying point' of its 'community and cult' if it is to have a future. Troeltsch conceives of the contemporary meaning of Jesus and his necessity in social-psychological rather than metaphysical terms, namely, the 'need a religious community has for a support, centre and symbol of its religious life'. Faith must insist upon Jesus as a 'holy reality' and not merely a beautiful myth, and so relies on critical historical analysis to establish and display the 'factuality of the total historical phenomenon of Jesus and the basic outline of his teaching and his religious personality' (Troeltsch 1990: 202, 197–8). Troeltsch invests in the possibility of overcoming the problems raised by modern historical consciousness with more and better history.

Such an account of Jesus' identity will eschew all metaphysical predicates, content to demonstrate 'the foundational meaning of the *personality* of Jesus as the *revelation* of God, the head of the community, and the effective symbol of saving and healing religious power, for as long as the Christian life-world endures' (Troeltsch 1991: 91). To replace traditional Christology with a Jesuology of this kind is the *sine qua non* of any properly *modern* Christianity, i.e., one which admits the claims of modern rationality and wants to retain the

p. 334 humanly valuable religious forces carried by Christianity in the West. The strategy is classically liberal in its isolation of the role of Jesus' personality and its beneficial impact upon piety as the basis for a renewal of Christianity; only a Jesus freed from the dead hand of dogma can enliven modern faith and thought. Distinctive, however, is Troeltsch's suggestion that the historic significance of Jesus' person should be parsed in sociological and psychological terms in recognition of the role 'cult and community' play in religious life. Such a strategy is exposed to the peril of evacuating Jesus' person into his *beneficia* understood naturalistically, and is invested in an historicism which might be regarded as inimical to essential features of Christian faith. Yet, others have suggested that it may hold untapped promise for Christological renewal underwritten by creative engagement with the social sciences (Coakley 1988: 193f.).

Doing Without the Historical Jesus: The Pursuit of Kerygmatic Christology

The sceptical conclusions Albert Schweitzer drew concerning the modern attempts to write the life of the historical Jesus are well known: the figure of the historical Jesus proves endlessly plastic. With the dual aim of demonstrating both the past facts about Jesus and his contemporary relevance, biographies of Jesus inevitably produced a hybrid figure—a 'half-historical, half-modern, Jesus' (Schweitzer 1968: 398)—situated in two worlds and a betrayal of both. The primary cure for this ill was a better history that eschewed modernization and held Jesus firmly in his own historical era. We need a prosecution of the quest that gets it right. The portrait of Jesus as a man saturated with Jewish apocalyptic expectation and submerged in eschatological modes of thinking and manners of life is Schweitzer's own contribution to ensuring that 'the true historical Jesus should overthrow the modern Jesus' (Schweitzer 1968: 403, 399). These were the features of the historical Jesus commonly suppressed in modern portraiture because they alienated Jesus from modernity, rendering him humanly remote and useless to morals and enlightened piety. They seemed to demand that we moderns part company with Jesus 'at the most decisive point' (Weiss 1971: 135).

But Schweitzer also seems to suggest that the results of critical history can be circumvented altogether in a present experience of Christ. He proposes that alongside the alien historical figure of the apocalyptic radical from Nazareth we are met by *another* Jesus: namely, a 'mighty spiritual force' whose own spirit reaches into the present by way of his simplicity, whose imperious teaching moves us by an immediate influence (Schweitzer 1968: 399, 401). Here the decisive material connection between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is unwinding. The identity and significance of Jesus here and now is distinct and insulated from that of the historical figure of Jesus then and there. As Schweitzer concludes, 'the truth is, it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it' (Schweitzer 1968: 401).

In the suggestion that the Jesus discovered by critical history should not only be distinguished but also substantially decoupled from the Christ of faith, we meet a hallmark of the second overarching trajectory beyond Strauss. Along this line of thinking, the critical reconstruction of the life of the historical Jesus is adjudged historically impossible, Christologically irrelevant, theologically illegitimate, or some combination of the three. Soundings in the work of Kähler, Herrman, and Bultmann will delineate these claims.

Martin Kähler and Wilhelm Herrmann

In a short set of pugnacious and influential essays published in 1896 as *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ of Faith*, Martin Kähler repudiated attempts to renew Christology on the basis of critical study of the historical Jesus and to 'set limits to the learned pontificating of the historians' (Kähler 1988: 73). Kähler argues that the very nature of the Gospels scuttles the historian's enterprise. The texts which tell of Jesus are, as to their origin, the confessions and testimonies of those who have believed upon him as the Christ; as to their content and ordering, they bespeak the interests and demands of faith; and as to their aim, they intend the promulgation and direction of that same faith in future generations. Arising from faith, ordered in faith, and keyed to the advancement of faith, the Gospels provide next to nothing of biographical interest but record instead the primitive and normative patterns of Christian proclamation. Indeed, they are the antithesis of the 'embellishing, rationalising, and psychologising rhetoric of recent biographies of Jesus' not because they represent some deficient antique species of the genre, but because they are in point of fact not historical biographies at all, but rather are 'already a form of dogmatics'. The paucity of historical source material to hand means that 'human creativity' must remain the primary motor driving attempts to write the life of Jesus (Kähler 1988: 93, 44, 43).

The person of whom the Gospels do tell us something is, Kähler asserts, the *historic biblical Christ*. The adjective 'biblical' signals acknowledgement that the canonicity of the Gospels is relevant to their substance and form. The adjective 'historic' has the force of 'effective across time' or 'history-making'; indeed it is synonymous with 'Saviour' since Kähler understands Jesus' saving work to be 'his person in its historic-suprahistoric effect' (Kähler 1988: 95). We should say that 'the real Christ, that is, the Christ who has exercised an influence on history ... *this real Christ is the Christ who is preached*' and is delivered into the present 'without the midwifery of historical research' (Kähler 1988: 66, 121). Faith arises from the experience of 'being "overpowered" by Christ as he encounters us in the picture the Bible paints of him ... the picture of Christ preached from and in faith' (Kähler 1988: 77).

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To identify the truth of the biblical portrait of Jesus with its evangelical effectiveness across time is to court charges of subjectivism and pragmatism (i.e., it's true because it works). Alert to such worries, Kähler argues that the objective and backward referent for the biblical picture of Christ is the saving work of God in Christ. The formation of the apostolic witness itself is a primal work of Jesus *qua* Saviour: '*Christ himself is the originator of the biblical picture of the Christ*', a picture which bears the 'ineffaceable impress' of his own 'self-attestation' (Kähler 1988: 87, 79). Kähler expounds this claim:

One might say ... that the Christ of the Gospels is 'the transparency of the Logos', with the qualification that this diaphanous medium is not a nebulous legend but a tangible human being, portrayed in a rich and concrete though brief and concise manner. This is, of course, not enough for a complete biography of Jesus of Nazareth; but it is sufficient for preaching and dogmatics.

(Kähler 1988: 95)

Kähler can relax about the problem of the historical Jesus because he conceives of the biblical witness as intrinsic to the outworking of the divine economy of salvation, something as he says, 'intrinsically interwoven with the creative means of grace, with the Word of God as it has arisen in history and done its work there' (Kähler 1988: 139). The question of how 'diaphanous' the earthly man Jesus can become and still be Christologically relevant remains.

In reasserting the divine origin and purpose of the Gospels and their portrait of Jesus he pushes back against the critical challenge posed by positive history in an attempt to shift the discussion into an explicitly dogmatic register. Kähler's concept of the '*historic Christ*' introduces into the debate something akin to the suggestive notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*—'effective history'—and his emphasis on the missionary *preaching* of the

primitive Church as the sole carrier of the memory of Jesus also anticipates Bultmann's appeal to the sole theological legitimacy of the *kerygmatic* Christ.

Wilhelm Herrmann—Bultmann's formative teacher—treats the problem of the historical Jesus in his influential work, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, in a manner akin to Kähler. Christian faith arises from the conviction that 'God makes Himself know to us, so that we may recognise Him, through a fact, on the strength of which we are able to believe on Him', namely, 'the appearance of Jesus in history' (Herrmann 1906: 65, 59). But does not the 'fact' of Jesus recede into the past, leaving us with only a storied tradition which, *qua* history, is shrouded in the 'mist of probability' (Herrmann 1906: 70)? Against Harnack and Troeltsch, Herrmann denies that 'fair confidence' in the judgements of the historians can dispel such fatal uncertainty. There can be no overcoming of history by history; indeed such an attempt is 'a fatal error' and 'misuse of science' (Herrmann 1906: 76–7). Instead, the certainty of faith is attained only when 'Jesus Himself becomes a real power to us when He reveals His inner life to us' in a present and overwhelming experience of the *beneficia Christi* which recapitulates the first disciples' own experience of his messianic power. Herrmann conceives of a personal encounter in which the figure of Jesus previously mediated by the 'mere record' becomes immediate as the agent of his own presence, the 'Living One' (Herrmann 1906: 74). Anchored to this, Christian faith and theology ↵ can 'allow the historical criticism of the New Testament writings to have full play', for the ever-shifting results of historical research serve only to 'destroy certain false props of faith' and to afford fresh occasions for the believer to lay hold of 'that portrait of Jesus which he carries within him as absolute truth' (Herrmann 1906: 77). Herrmann concludes:

When we speak of the historical Christ we mean that personal life of Jesus which speaks to us from the New Testament, as the disciples' testimony to their faith, but which, when we perceive it, always comes home to us as a miraculous revelation. That historical research cannot give us this we *know*. But neither will it ever take this from us by any of its discoveries. This we *believe*, the more we experience the influence that this picture of the glory of Jesus has upon us.

(Herrmann 1906: 77–8)

The suggestion that the problem of the historical Jesus is overcome on the basis of a *contemporary* experience of faith occasioned by the portrait of Christ attested in the New Testament closely resembles Kähler's proposal. Yet Herrmann's account is more subjective, personal, and undogmatic in form than the more ecclesial, public, and doctrinally articulated position advanced by Kähler. Where Herrmann is content to speak of the 'fact' of Jesus at the origin of the Gospel witness, Kähler expounded more fully the claim that an act of divine self-attestation stands at the origin of the Gospel portrait as well as at the present point of its proclamation and reception in faith. Taken together these accounts display many of the features of the position which will be radicalized in the next generation by Rudolf Bultmann.

Rudolf Bultmann and Beyond

The key to Bultmann's position on the matter of the historical Jesus is the conviction that the New Testament materials are *kerygmatic* to the core: even in the earliest layers of tradition accessible within the Gospel texts, what is met is the faith and proclamation of the Church. The *kerygma* is the product of the Easter faith of the earliest Christians, a declaration of their trust and assurance in the Cross of Christ as God's own saving act. Its content is essentially paradoxical for it identifies a finite and contingent human destiny—namely that of Jesus of Nazareth—as at one and the same time the eschatological event of divine salvation. He is, echoing Herrmann, 'the fact of salvation' (Bultmann 1969b: 284). The historicity of this event is ingredient in the *kerygma* as one of the poles of the paradox of the Gospel. As Bultmann insists, 'he in whom God presently acts, through whom God has reconciled the world, is a real historical human being ... [an] historical occurrence in space and time' (Bultmann 1984: 41). Though our historical spades turn at the *kerygma*, that message itself gestures insistently towards the historical reality of Jesus as the one in whom the eschatological crisis of divine judgement and forgiveness has come.

p. 338 In light of this, one might expect critical historical study of the life of Jesus to be essential to Christology. Bultmann argues otherwise. All the essential moves are made in the introduction to his early work *Jesus and the Word* and confirmed in later essays up into the 1960s (Bultmann 1934 and 1964). First, he argues that in disclosing the composite, layered, and kerygmatic character of the Gospels, form and redaction criticism have corroded the prospects of a credible reconstruction of the life and personality of Jesus. Plainly stated: 'we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist' (Bultmann 1934: 8, 14). He observes that this work of radical historical criticism is a salutary iconoclasm: whereas conservative scholars were 'perpetually engaged in salvage operations', Bultmann said, 'I calmly let the fire burn, for I see that what is consumed is only the fanciful portraits of Life-of-Jesus theology, and that means nothing other than "Christ after the flesh". But "Christ after the flesh" is no concern of ours' (Bultmann 1969a: 132). Bultmann's interest in the historical identity of Jesus is concentrated solely upon him as the purposed 'bearer of a message' destined to become himself the content of the new Christian message. He admits he would be untroubled should the name of Jesus only appear in quotation marks as a cipher and 'abbreviation for the historical phenomenon with which are concerned' (Bultmann 1934: 8, 14). Such a gesture would reflect not only historical scepticism, but also—crucially—the attitude of Christian faith. Bultmann understands himself to be reproducing the disposition of the New Testament itself: 'Paul and John each in his own way indicate that we do not need to go beyond the "that"' (Bultmann 1964: 20). He explains:

The proclaimer must become the proclaimed, because it is the fact *that* he proclaimed which his decisive. The decisive thing is his person (not his personality), *here and now*, the event, the commission, the summons. When the primitive community called him Messiah they were confessing he was the decisive event, the act of God, the inaugurator of the new world. The definitive element in the concept of the Messiah is not the kind of nature which may be ascribed to him. The Messiah is he who in the final hour brings salvation, God's salvation, the eschatological salvation which brings to an end all human ways and wishes.

(Bultmann 1969b: 284)

The historical is only materially relevant as a constituent of the eschatological, that is, as the affirmation *that* Jesus Christ is the occasion and locus of God's ultimate saving activity. It is the historicity (*that*) and not the history (*what* or *how*) of Jesus that is Christologically relevant. As Bultmann puts it, the Christ of the *kerygma* is not an historical figure, but 'the *kerygma* presupposes the historical Jesus, however much it may have mythologised him' (Bultmann 1964: 18). If Christology is a properly eschatological discourse—and hence can only view Jesus *kata pneuma*—then it has no stake in the elaboration of an account of the Jesus of history. For the historian *qua* historian has no access to this reality as it can only be verified in and by the existential

p. 339 decision of faith ↪ itself. The logic of this position had been anticipated and made pellucid by Kierkegaard in his *Philosophical Fragments* (Kierkegaard 1985: 103).

Bultmann thoroughly rejects the Christological significance of critical reconstructions of the life of Jesus. Pursuit of the historical Jesus, in as much as it looks to validate belief in the Gospel, is a distraction—indeed a defection—from the *kerygma* wherein Jesus Christ, the saving Word of God, is in fact present to be encountered and grasped in and by faith. Bultmann's programme of 'demythologising' the New Testament is—in contrast to Strauss' work with the same concept—a *constructive* hermeneutical undertaking in the service of what Kähler called the 'transparency' of Jesus to the Logos. The interpretation of ancient mythical devices thus aims at clarification of contemporary proclamation of the *Christus praesens* rather than any exhumation of a Jesus of history.

A number of questions attend Bultmann's proposal: how 'transparent' can Jesus become before being nullified? What does it mean to affirm Jesus as a 'person' without 'personality' as Bultmann does? How coherent is the notion of a historical *that* without any meaningful extension, substance, and form? Is this actually what the New Testament witness presents? Does the meaning of the Pauline 'κατὰ σάρκα' map onto the critical historical perspective upon the figure of Jesus?

Already in 1935, fellow form critic, Martin Dibelius had signalled the need to redress an imbalance, arguing that 'the Gospels seek to give more than mere reports ... they seek to report historical facts as well as to engage in Christology. In the synthesis of these two tendencies lies their secret, and he who honestly engages in Gospel criticism must endeavour to explain this secret' (Dibelius 1935: 97). The generation after Bultmann attempted to deliver dogmatic Christology 'a better solution than the historical life-of-Jesus theology and the dehistoricizing kerygmatic theology' (Dahl 1991: 109). Various strategies were essayed to thicken the historical element of the *kerygma* by reference to a body of traditional and authentic *didache* concerning Jesus which either encompassed the *kerygma*, ran parallel to it, or was properly ingredient within it. A distinctive intervention came from Ernst Käsemann.

While continuing to affirm that the Gospels are *kerygmatic*, Käsemann rejects a radical historical scepticism which he considers theologically dangerous. The Gospels themselves provide the lynchpin, insisting as they do that their eschatological message of salvation concerns 'the earthly Jesus' and is 'bound to *this* man from Nazareth, to the arena of Palestine and to a concrete time with its special circumstances' (Käsemann 1964: 25, 31). Their very literary form reflects a conviction that 'the life history of Jesus has its relevance for faith'—indeed as Käsemann observes, 'if one has absolutely no interest in the historical Jesus then one does not write a Gospel' (Käsemann 1964: 25; 1969: 41). The Gospels embody a countermovement of *Historisierung* (historicizing) of the mythical subject of the primitive *kerygma*, a movement of which dogmatic Christology must take account (Käsemann 1964: 24). If it is exegetically illegitimate to conceive of Jesus apart from the perspective of Easter faith in his eschatological lordship, it is similarly problematic to conceive of him as Lord and Saviour apart from his identity as the earthly Jesus. In this we see how the New Testament message considers 'the historical Jesus among the criteria of its own validity', as a canon for resisting any ↪ drift toward Docetism, and a check upon spiritualist enthusiasm. Käsemann is worried that the emphases of the Kähler/Herrmann/Bultmann line reduced the identity of Jesus to a mathematical singularity whose abstraction allows 'Christ' to become a 'mythological cipher' of uncertain referent (Käsemann 1969: 43–4). Käsemann sees both the eschatological content of Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God, and the course of his obedience to the Cross—the pattern of his life of self-humbling—as materially decisive historical elements of Jesus' identity. In Christological terms, Käsemann suggests that the Gospels commit the theological tradition to a concern for the integrity of the singular subject of the *status exaltationis* and *status exinanitionis*, the paradoxical identity of the exalted and the humiliated Lord (Käsemann 1964: 46).

A primary theological concern animating Käsemann is the need to resist the ideological captivity and self-justifying conceit into which Christian faith can lapse. Too thoroughgoing a historical scepticism and too

complete an identification of Christ as present in the *kerygma* enfeebles faith's capacity for discernment:

The question as to what is prior to faith in the sense that it supplies the criteria of faith can in the last resort only be answered christologically; and answered in such a way as to keep Christology distinct from ecclesiology and anthropology and in no circumstances to substitute either for it. Christ alone is the Ground, the Lord and Judge of faith ... the *kerygma* which is worthy of the name does not, then, simply make Christ present; it creates at the same time a proper distance between him and the hearer.

(Käsemann 1969: 60)

One of the functions of the question of the historical Jesus in relation to Christology is to help to secure this distance. Acknowledgement of the individuality and otherness of the man from Nazareth—the mortified shape of his life and the uniqueness of his message of the advent of the Kingdom of God—is intrinsic, then, to the way in which the Christian community ‘puts its faith beyond its own power to manipulate’. The particularity of the earthly Jesus is ingredient in the *extra nos* to which the *kerygma* testifies, and aids in discerning the spirits and resisting the transmutation of the preached Christ into the sublime object of religious ideology (Käsemann 1969: 61, 63). The Gospels themselves embody and bequeath to the Church this dynamic of inner Christological critique ensuring that, ‘the function of recalling the historical Jesus is, within the framework of the Gospel, a permanent necessity’ (Käsemann 1969: 64).

Concluding Remarks

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Since it was raised in the nineteenth century, the question of the historical Jesus and its significance for Christology has become a permanent feature of the theological landscape. The transit of this question from Strauss' *Leben Jesu* to the inauguration of the ‘New Quest’ after the Second World War has proven to be paradigmatic: many current debates read as variations on themes first worked through during this long-century of enquiry and debate. We conclude this discussion with two summary observations.

First, there is a sense in which the question of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith mirrors—sometimes closely, oftentimes more remotely—aspects of traditional treatments of the relation of the human and divine natures. The ease with which modern thinkers deploy the language of ancient heresy in diagnosing the contemporary Christological problems at which they take aim—think, for example, of Käsemann's repeated invocation of Docetism—is telling in this regard. One could further argue that Bultmann's minimalist approach to the historical life of Jesus within the eschatological *kerygma*—a ‘person without a personality’—echoes the logic of the *anhypostatic* character of Christ's humanity as conceived neo-Chalcedonian thinkers. Traditional concern for the unity of Christ's person and its coherence as the single subject of all Christological predication is reiterated (albeit in a different idiom) in debates concerning whether the *kerygma* of the Christ as Saviour and Lord derives from the man Jesus himself, his teaching, activity, and person. What is to be made of such parallels? Are they so many dogmatic ghosts not yet exorcized from modern historical conceptualities? Or do they signal the abiding and formative power of the eschatological grammar of the New Testament to press upon and mould ancient metaphysical and modern historical discourse alike?

Second, beginning with the comprehensive application of the notion of ‘myth’ by Strauss, modern historical scholarship has seen that the depictions of Jesus in the New Testament—and by extension their distillation, restatement, and conceptual expansion in the subsequent doctrines of the Church—are intrinsically *hermeneutical* in character. Critical analysis of how various literary conventions, poetical forms, typology, prophecy, symbolism, etc., function in the Gospels as *theologoumena* not only honours the essentially dogmatic or kerygmatic nature of the texts, it also invites reflection on their specifically Christological significance. For such mythical devices as are ingredient in the Gospels are not simply the literary and conceptual detritus of an antique worldview now alien to us. They are themselves hermeneutical devices, ‘the means used to express the

significance of the person, Jesus, as the decisive, eschatological saving act of God' (Bultmann 1969b: 284; 1984: 33–5). Pushing further we may reflect upon their more specifically *historiographical* function. John Marsh observes that the writing of history, whether ancient or modern, involves not only chronicling *that* and *how* a thing happened but also discerning and displaying *why* it happened, that is, it involves discursive strategies for pressing beyond simply recording 'what took place' in order to represent 'what was going on in what took place'. The Gospels are fundamentally concerned to relate *what took place* in the life and death of Jesus so that others may come to learn by the way these stories are told just *what was going on* that constitutes them as the Gospel of God (Marsh 1968: 18, 49). On such a view the thoroughly dogmatic and kerygmatic form of Gospels is seen to be integral to their character *as history* rather than being played off against history in a false positivist dichotomy. Bultmann's contention that critical study of the New Testament involved the work of *Geschichte* rather than mere *Historie*—that is, required an 'interpretation of history based on the historic (that is, on the existential) encounter with ↵ history' itself—arises from an appreciation of the mutual entanglement of the theological and historiographical in these texts (Bultmann 1964: 31).

It has recently been argued that classical Christological categories were neither imposed upon nor deduced from the biblical witness, but rather should be understood to redescribe patterns of judgements actually 'present in the texts' (Yeago 1994: 153). To approach to the biblical portrait of Jesus Christ as the subject of the evangelical *kerygma* with a view to perceiving how it operates *historiographically*, invites the thought that the analysis, repetition, and conceptual expansion of this portrait in Christological doctrine could be apprehended as an exercise in historiographical redescription, an expression of the need in every era to discern and to say again *what went on* in *what took place* in the life and death of man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Suggested Reading

Coakley (1988); Frei (1974); Hanson (1966); Morgan (1982).

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