

# The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith

The Incarnational Narrative as History

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# 1 The Incarnational Narrative and the Problem of Its Historicity

In a trivial sense every human religion is a historical phenomenon and has historical roots. Every human religion has some kind of historical foundation, in the sense that its origins lie in some set of historical events. Nevertheless, there are large differences both between different religions and even within a single religion in the significance attached to these historical origins. The historical origins of Hinduism seem lost in the mists of time, and Hinduism seems none the worse for that. Buddhists certainly revere Gautama, but Theravada Buddhists do not think that enlightenment is in any way contingent upon historical knowledge of Gautama's life. It is rather the timeless truths that Gautama discovered that are important.

History seems more important for Islam and Judaism. Devout Muslims believe that God revealed himself to Muhammad, and that the right path to submission to Allah is found in the revelation thus given. Nevertheless, the focus of the revelation is not on Muhammad, but on Allah. One should accept Muhammad as a faithful revealer of Allah, but the locus of faith is Allah, not Muhammad. History seems still more important for Jews, for Orthodox Judaism has always seen itself as grounded in the claims that God chose a historical people for a particular destiny, delivered that people from oppression, and continued to deal with that people in history, to fulfil God's own purposes for the human race. It is an open question, one still debated by Jewish theologians, to what

degree Judaism is dependent on the historical truth of the narrative of this interaction.

## 1. The Incarnational Narrative

Though there are many historical narratives in the Bible that are significant for Christians, orthodox Christian faith has traditionally understood itself as rooted supremely in the life, death, and resurrection of a historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. Whether Judaism could survive the discovery that Moses never existed and the Exodus never occurred is not for me to say, but it has seemed to many Christians that Christian faith could not survive if Jesus did not live, die, and rise from the dead. This story of Jesus I shall call ‘the incarnational narrative’. I shall use this phrase to designate the story of Jesus of Nazareth, taken from the New Testament as a whole, as that story has traditionally been told by the Christian Church.<sup>8</sup> Thus understood it is not a story about a mere human being, but an account of Jesus as the Son of God, a unique, divine person. ‘The incarnational narrative’ is therefore my way of designating a particular account which is theologically rich. I do not, however, wish to endow the narrative with more theological baggage than is necessary. In so far as possible, I shall assume a version of the narrative that does not take sides on questions that are disputed in-house among different streams of historic Christian orthodoxy.

Of course many will say that to understand the story of Jesus as an incarnational narrative is already to endow it with too much theological baggage. Clearly, I have already tipped the scales in the direction of the orthodox understanding of Jesus, simply by taking the New Testament story *as that document has been interpreted by the Church*. The narrative in

<sup>8</sup> Obviously one could object at this point that there is not one Christian Church but many. In speaking of the Church I mean to refer to all branches of Christianity that continue to affirm the early ecumenical creeds, and when I refer to the Church’s teachings, witness, or convictions, I mean to refer to the central affirmations of those Churches that are consistent with those creeds and with each other. Clearly these affirmations are a limited subset of the actual affirmations of any particular Church. This is roughly equivalent to what C. S. Lewis called ‘mere Christianity’.

which I am interested is a ‘thick’ one, not one that is theologically bare or neutral. Still, it is the narrative itself upon which I wish to focus. There have been, of course, many attempts on the part of Christians to capture the significance of the incarnational narrative, many attempts to express in propositional form what the story is about, why it is important, and what it implies. One can question any such attempt without questioning the fundamental importance of the narrative itself. One can even question whether or not one can and should try to articulate the meaning of the story, as has been done by some recent ‘narrative theologians’, without doubting in any way the crucial significance of the story itself.

Of course many New Testament scholars today argue that one cannot meaningfully speak of one coherent story found in the New Testament; rather they argue that the message of the New Testament is irreducibly plural. In one sense this contention is absolutely correct. The New Testament was written by diverse authors with diverse concerns and aims, and the various books lend themselves to studies of ‘the theology of Paul’ or ‘the theology of Mark’. Nevertheless, despite this diversity, the Church has historically regarded the New Testament as a unified revelation from God, inextricably tied to the Old Testament, and one which contains a unified story in and through its diversity. That is in fact how the Church has traditionally read the Bible.

There is a vast literature dealing with questions concerning how the Church moved from whatever historical events lay behind the New Testament documents to the New Testament, and how the Church developed, from those events and from those documents, orthodox Christian doctrines.<sup>9</sup> In this work I shall not address such questions. I shall not discuss how the New Testament came into existence, or ‘the making of Christian doctrine’. By largely ignoring such issues I do not mean to imply that they are not important. I ignore them for three reasons: (1) I lack the competence to treat them adequately; (2) it does not appear necessary to me to deal with

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (London: A. & C. Black, 1962 ) and *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 ); and Maurice F. Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

them in order to treat the questions in which I am interested; and (3) no single book can deal with every issue, and this one is, if anything, over-ambitious in scope already.

Of the three reasons given, only the second seems likely to be controversial. How can I examine the truth of the incarnational narrative as the Church's story without discussing such questions as how the New Testament was developed, whether the Church's interpretation of the New Testament is sound, or whether the distinctive doctrines of the Church can be generated from the narrative? Interesting and important as those questions are, it does not seem to me that one must have answers to them prior to any consideration of the truth of the Church's narrative. Regardless of how the New Testament was written and developed, it is a fact that the New Testament exists, and is put forward by the Church as a faithful witness to the truth. Thus it seems perfectly legitimate for someone to examine and reflect on the content of that witness, even if one is not sure as to how the witness came into being.

As for questions of interpretation, it is today a vexed question even to say what it might mean for the Church's version of the story to be the 'correct' interpretation, and many would deny that there can be such a thing. While I would certainly not wish to deny that some interpretations are better than others, and some are just plain wrong, it seems unlikely, in this post-modern era, that one will find any particular interpretation to be *the* correct reading of a text. And in fact the history of New Testament interpretation strongly suggests that the New Testament under-determines its own interpretation; it seems foolish even for a Christian believer to claim that an honest, reasonable interpreter of the New Testament would necessarily arrive at readings consistent with Christian orthodoxy, *if the interpretative process proceeded independently of the guidance of the Church and the Holy Spirit.*

However, within the plurality of interpretations of the New Testament that can be and are offered, once more it is undeniable that the Church's reading of this document, and of its central narrative, *exists* as an offering in the marketplace of ideas, whatever one may want to do with it. And what I wish to do with it is examine it and reflect on the truth of the story as thus interpreted, rather than debate the 'correctness' of

the interpretation as an interpretation. The Church's story is one that continues to be offered to all comers, and there is no good reason why we should not ask whether the story, with its historical claims, could be true, and whether it is true.

There are well-known difficulties with the harmonization of the four Gospels. The Gospels not only present differences in coverage and emphases, but certainly appear to contain inconsistencies. I take it that most of these difficulties concern the details and not the major outlines of the story, and thus that it is possible to read the New Testament as providing a *basically* coherent narrative about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That it is possible to read the New Testament in this way is proved by the fact that the Church has for centuries given it just such a reading. Furthermore, it continues to be read in that way, even by individuals who are well aware of the results of contemporary biblical scholarship.<sup>10</sup>

The Church's story, the one I am calling the incarnational narrative, is an account of how the divine Word took on human flesh, was born as a baby, lived a life characterized by miraculous healing and authoritative teaching, died a cruel and voluntary death for the sake of redeeming sinful humans, was raised by God to life, and now abides with God, awaiting the time of his glorious return and ultimate triumph. So much at least seems common ground among orthodox Christians, be they Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant.

As noted above, I shall also omit any discussion as to how the Church moved from telling this story to the development of fully articulated credal Christianity. Nor shall I discuss the question of the general credibility of such fully developed faith. Rather, I wish to discuss just one facet of Christian faith, the credibility of its founding narrative. Within this question I shall pay special attention to the historicity of the narrative. Is the basic narrative historically reliable? Do the four Gospels, along with speeches in Acts and references to Jesus in the Epistles, present a *basically* reliable record of the life, death,

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Arthur Wainwright, *Beyond Biblical Criticism: Encountering Jesus in Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1982), particularly pp. 21–46. Wainwright shows convincingly that the differences in the New Testament accounts are secondary to the underlying similarities.

and resurrection of Jesus? It should be obvious that such a concern for the basic reliability of the narrative is quite distinct from a concern for the 'inerrancy' or 'infallibility' of the Bible. My concern is not with the Bible as a whole, but only with the central elements of the story of Jesus, as the Church has distilled the story. Someone who embraces this story as true is not for that reason committed to any stronger claims about the truthfulness of the Bible.

The incarnational narrative is of course a unity, and it cannot be neatly separated into theological and historical components. An assertion that Jesus as the Son of God died on the cross for the sins of the human race is a complex claim, and its truth can be challenged from many different perspectives. Most obviously, the claim is historically false if Jesus was not in fact crucified. However, the claim as a whole is also false as an historical claim if its theological preconditions are false. If, for example, Jesus was not the Son of God in the intended sense of 'Son of God' then it is false that Jesus was crucified as the Son of God. If it makes no sense to say that a particular person could atone for the human race, then it is false that Jesus atoned for the sins of the human race on the cross. The defence of the narrative as historically true must therefore involve the consideration of theological and philosophical issues, as well as 'pure' historical ones.

At least until the Enlightenment period, the overwhelming main body of Christians was united in holding to the fundamental importance of the historicity of this narrative. Virtually all Christians believed, in addition to such purely theological propositions as that God created the heavens and the earth, that Jesus was born of a virgin, and that he was crucified, buried, and resurrected on the third day. The fundamental importance of this is attested by the historical reference in the Apostles' Creed: Jesus 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. Though Pilate himself would otherwise surely bask in well-deserved oblivion, he is immortalized by the need early Christians felt to link the passion of Jesus with secular history.

Such beliefs were never, for example, an issue between Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation. Catholics and Protestants alike not only affirmed the historicity of these crucial events, but unhesitatingly viewed the four Gospel

accounts as historically reliable, even in the face of well-known discrepancies in the accounts.

## 1.2. History and the Historical: Clarifying the Terminology

I wish to say something about why the historicity of the incarnational narrative is important, though this subject will be treated in depth in later chapters. However, I need first to clarify how I shall use such key terms as 'history' and 'historical'. The first point to be made is the often-noticed one that the English term 'history' has two importantly different senses. Sometimes when we speak of 'history' we speak of *events*, what has actually happened. At other times we mean to speak of the *accounts*, the narratives, given by historians and others about those events. I want to argue that the historicity of the incarnational narrative is important in both of these senses of 'history', but first I need to say a bit about each of them.

What does it mean to say that an *event* is historical or is part of history? I mean nothing exotic or fancy, but intend to use whatever rough concept we all employ in judging that the assassination of John F. Kennedy was an historical event, but that the death of Superman in a Marvel comic book story was not, though the writing and publication of the story was historical. I will not attempt a full philosophical analysis of 'history' in the sense of events. Rather, I will simply say that an event or series of events qualifies as historical if it can be assigned a date and if it enjoys meaningful relations, including causal relations, with other events in that stream of datable events that includes human doings and sufferings. Anyone who does not know how to identify that stream can only be told that it is that stream that includes the doings and sufferings of his or her own life.

There are some distinctions commonly made by theologians that will play no role in my account. One of these is the distinction between the historic and the historical Jesus. What is historic can be distinguished from what is historical by virtue of its importance and significance. However, the relation

between the historic and the historical is not always clear and seems to be understood differently by different authors.<sup>11</sup> Some view what is historic as just a subset of what is historical, so that to say that an event is historic is to affirm that it is both historical *and* has a certain kind of importance. However, others use the term 'historic' to denote an alleged event that has had this kind of importance, whether historical or not. For example, someone using the term 'historic' in this way might say that the story of Adam and Eve is historic even if it is not historical. So on some usages, what is historic is automatically also historical, while on other usages this is not so. Given the potentiality for confusion, I shall avoid any discussion of 'the historic Jesus', since it is obvious that the life of Jesus had the kind of importance in question. The object of inquiry is whether the story can be affirmed as historical.

I shall also put aside as unhelpful the distinction some draw between 'the real Jesus' and the 'historical Jesus'. The idea behind this distinction is the correct insight that the accounts given by historians about Jesus of Nazareth can never be completely certain or complete. John Meier, for example, noting these points, goes on to say that we should distinguish between the 'real Jesus', the Jesus who walked the roads of Palestine in the first century, and the 'historical Jesus', who is 'a modern abstraction and construct'.<sup>12</sup> The historical Jesus is the 'fragmentary, hypothetical reconstruction of him by modern means of research'.<sup>13</sup> Meier goes on to say that it is a confusing anachronism to say that the Gospels at points present 'the historical Jesus'. Presumably Meier means by this that by definition 'the historical Jesus' refers to the accounts of Jesus given by modern historians, and so cannot be found, even in a fragmentary way, in the Gospels.

I find this unhelpful for a number of reasons. First of all, Meier's usage here flies in the face of ordinary language, in which to say that an account given of some event is historical is not merely to say that it occurs in a narrative given by a

<sup>11</sup> John P. Meier, in *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, i. (New York: Doubleday, 1991), points out this confusion and gives several helpful examples. See pp. 26–31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

modern historian, but that the event really occurred. If the incident of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree and then confessing the deed did not occur, then we would surely say it is not historical, and in so doing, we would not just be saying that modern historians fail to include it in their accounts. We would also be saying the incident never happened. What Meier calls 'the historical Jesus' would better be termed 'the historians' Jesus'.

One hardly needs to make a conceptual distinction between the historical and the real in order to recognize that there is a difference between the reality of a series of events and the narratives that later historians recount. Of course a narrative is not itself the reality that it attempts to portray. And of course all such narratives are incomplete, some more so than others, and subject to the usual failings of finite human knowers. But the conceptual distinction Meier wishes to draw actually muddies the water. For if we ask what is the aim of historians in giving their historical reconstructions, surely part of the answer is that they are attempting to describe what really happened. Of course the accounts that historians give are always selective and reflect the interpretative framework and ends of the historian, but they none the less aim at the real. Speaking of these accounts as 'the historical Jesus' (or Jesuses) is confusing because it treats attempts to represent reality as if they were themselves the reality being represented. If the 'historical Jesus' is simply an account given by a historian, then no account given by a historian can fail to be historical. It seems preferable to maintain an 'event' sense of history, in which to say that an event is historical is simply to say that it really happened. Narratives, which we shall consider in a moment, can be said to be historically true to the degree that they accurately represent the events which occurred.

Biblical scholars such as John Meier, who are also Christian believers, have another reason for distinguishing between 'the historical Jesus' and 'the real Jesus'. The reason is that there is often a tension between the picture of Jesus that emerges from the work of the historian and the picture that the faithful believer who is part of the Church must affirm. By insisting that the 'historical Jesus' is not identical with the 'real Jesus', Meier leaves open the possibility that the 'Jesus of faith' or 'the

theological Jesus',<sup>14</sup> may also capture part of the 'real Jesus'. For this reason, Meier emphasizes that the historical Jesus must be regarded as 'a scientific construct, a theoretical abstraction of modern scholars'.<sup>15</sup>

Now, if Meier changed his terminology and did not speak of the 'historical Jesus' but rather of the distinction between the 'historians' Jesus' and 'the Jesus of faith' I should not object very much to this. His point is that the picture (or rather pictures) of Jesus presented by modern critical historians must be regarded as a picture that derives from a particular 'game' with a particular set of rules. '[I]n the quest for the historical Jesus, the "rules of the game" allow no appeal to what is known or held by faith.'<sup>16</sup> Doubtless, Meier is rightly describing the actual practice of most historians. Nevertheless, questions can and should be raised about this practice, for the 'game' of the historians is one that attempts to justify itself on the grounds that it is the best way of getting at the truth about the real Jesus. As Meier himself says, 'only a careful examination of the Gospel material in the light of the criteria of historicity can hope to yield *reliable* results'<sup>17</sup> (emphasis mine).

A dilemma arises at this point. What about the conclusions that can be arrived at by faith? Is faith a reliable way of reaching conclusions about Jesus? If so, and faith therefore helps one reach truth, then why should not the historian take the methods of faith into account, if the historian is interested in truth? On the other hand, if relying on faith does not lead to reliable conclusions, why should anyone accept these conclusions? If faith does not provide a reliable way of reaching truth, then faith begins to look like an unjustified standpoint, a 'personal choice' that looks arbitrary.

Meier and others like him may well argue at this point that the picture of Jesus that the historian gives may not be the only reliable picture; it is simply a picture that 'provides an

<sup>14</sup> It is unclear whether or not Meier wishes to identify these two, and I do not assume they are identical.

<sup>15</sup> Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, ii (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 112. These rules of the game for Meier also exclude any acceptance of miracles as real events, though he also says they exclude dogmatic claims that miracles cannot occur; see *ibid.* 11. I discuss at length in Ch. 8 whether critical historians must avoid any acceptance of miracles.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 5.

academically respectable common ground and starting point for dialogue among people of various faiths or no faith'.<sup>18</sup> I would agree that it is a worthwhile endeavour to see what kind of picture might emerge from a conversation of people of various faiths. For the sake of participating in such a conversation, the participants might well decide to bracket some of their beliefs, as Meier recommends. So I do not object to this enterprise as one method of studying the real Jesus. However, I see no reason to assume that the rules of such a conversation provide the *only* reliable way of getting at the real Jesus, and no reason therefore to regard such rules as binding on all historians for all purposes. Rather, they ought to be seen as binding on those who choose to participate in a conversation that is governed by such rules. Other conversations, equally pluralistic in character, might operate by different rules. For example, a Christian might wish to know what a Jew who does *not* bracket his faith thinks of Jesus. The rules Meier has in mind define *a* historical method, but they are not part of *the* historical method, if indeed there is such a thing.

In Chapters 8 to 10 I shall argue that contemporary epistemology is open to the idea that faith perspectives may contribute in a positive way to gaining knowledge. The old dichotomy between what we 'know' on the basis of objective evidence and what we 'believe' on the basis of subjective commitment is no longer tenable. Knowledge is not rooted in 'pure objectivity' but is suffused with subjective commitments; hence faith cannot be separated from knowledge. At the same time genuine faith should not settle for the status of arbitrary, subjective commitment; faith ought to reflect on whether what it is committed to is really so, and therefore must be open to critical reflection and questioning.

### 1.3. Why History (In Both Senses) Matters

If we consider the 'event' sense of history, it is clear that Christianity has traditionally affirmed that in the life, death,

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 5.

and resurrection of Jesus, *something happened*, something that has fundamental importance for the entire human race and even for the whole created order. This something has been understood variously: as a victory over Satan, the satisfaction of a penalty, the offering of a sacrifice, the plundering of hell, the effecting of a reconciliation between God and an alienated humanity, making possible the glorification of the human race, and the overcoming of powerful spiritual forces. All such theories agree in understanding these events as playing a crucial role in making it possible for the human race and the created order to be redeemed and restored. The importance of history follows clearly from this: if these events are regarded as decisive in making salvation possible, then if they did not occur, salvation has not in fact been made possible, at least in the manner that Christians affirm.

As was noted at the beginning of this section, the English word 'history' can refer not just to the events themselves, but also to the accounts we give of those events, and Christianity affirms the importance of the historicity of the incarnational narrative in this second sense as well. Christians do not simply say that it is vital that the events occurred; they also affirm the crucial importance of *knowing* about those events. The author of the fourth Gospel, who attempted to give a narrative account of these events, put it this way: 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'<sup>19</sup> It is through coming to know the story that one can acquire faith in Jesus as the Christ, and having such faith is the key to life. So in affirming the importance of the historicity of the incarnational narrative, Christians affirm both that it is important that the events which the narrative depicts actually occurred, and that we have some means of becoming acquainted with the narrative and knowing or believing that the events thereby depicted occurred.

Many questions can of course be raised at this point. Are all the events depicted in the narrative important? Are they of

<sup>19</sup> John 20: 30–1. All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

equal importance? Why are the events important? How detailed must our knowledge of the narrative be? How accurate must our knowledge be? How do we gain such knowledge? These are important questions and many of them will be discussed later on, but for the moment we must bracket them to focus on the fundamental importance of the basic historicity of the narrative. These other questions might be answered in many different ways by a person who consistently continued to affirm that the historical character of the founding narrative is essential.

## 1.4. Why Belief in the Narrative Has Become Difficult

Despite the fundamental importance of the historicity of the incarnational narrative, since the Enlightenment that historicity has become deeply problematic for Christians. To put it bluntly and simply, we have become unsure whether the events happened, and uncertain about whether we can know that they happened, even if they did. The problematic character of the historicity of the narrative is no secret among mainstream academic theologians; one of the few things liberal theologians, neo-orthodox theologians, process theologians, feminist theologians, and post-modernist theologians would probably all agree on is that it is very doubtful that the New Testament Gospel narratives represent reliable history.

Why has something that was taken for granted by almost everyone in the West prior to the Enlightenment become recognized by almost everyone in the West as a problem since then? The quick answer is simply 'modernity'. That is, the assumptions and mind-set of the Enlightenment have made it difficult for us to affirm the historicity of the incarnational narrative. Though this answer cries out for development, so much is neutral and uncontroversial. When we begin to say whether this way of thinking we call 'modernity' represents an advance or a decline, or both, the debate begins. Some would claim that it is hard for us to affirm the historicity of the incarnational narrative because we have advanced beyond the

mythological, pre-scientific patterns of thinking that dominated the ancient world, when the narrative came into being. We have overcome the credulity that characterized people of earlier times and developed new standards of critical history. Others might say the change is not so much a mark of intellectual advance as a sign of a deterioration of our imaginative powers and spiritual earnestness. Regardless of one's opinions here, it is possible to trace out some of the aspects of modernity that have created the difficulties. I shall briefly discuss four factors here, though each will be given additional consideration later.

### 1.4.1. Post-Enlightenment Scepticism About the Supernatural

Both the metaphysics and the epistemology of the Enlightenment provide rocky soil for belief in a narrative that embodies accounts of angelic appearances, exorcisms, mysterious healings, and resurrections. To look first at metaphysics, the Enlightenment saw the development of deistic and mechanistic views of the natural world that left no room for miracles and the supernatural. Even though most of the great seventeenth-century scientists were devout Christians, the picture of the natural world they developed, in which events in nature are the product of impersonal, mechanistic laws, seemed to fit poorly with a picture of the world as shaped by a loving providence. In such a world, miraculous and supernatural events seem like alien intrusions, and there is a strong tendency to discount supernatural explanations and look for natural ones.

Equally important is the fact that the epistemological positions characteristic of the Enlightenment, either in rationalist or empiricist forms, are not hospitable towards belief in the veracity of stories involving miracles and supernatural agents. The tendency in rationalist epistemology is to see essential religious knowledge as knowledge of necessary truths, knowable a priori.<sup>20</sup> From such a perspective, miracle stories have too much of a contingent, accidental character, and the empirical

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion of 'religious rationalism' in Ch. 8 for a detailed discussion of these issues.

grounds for such beliefs do not look like the sort of foundation that really important knowledge requires. Perhaps such stories can be reinterpreted as expressions of rational truths; that at least is what Immanuel Kant attempted in his *Religion with the Limits of Reason Alone*. In such a case, however, their factual, historical character becomes inessential and insignificant.

An empiricist view of knowledge might appear to provide more promising soil for stories of the miraculous, but here the monumental figure of David Hume looms, along with a host of lesser lights.<sup>21</sup> Hume's attack on belief in miracles in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* has inspired many rejoinders, but even conservative, orthodox Christians continue to feel the weight of his argument.<sup>22</sup> Essentially, Hume assumes that the question of belief in a miracle boils down to a question of evidence. He assumes the kind of evidentialist epistemology that is so characteristic of the Enlightenment, and argues that the improbability of miracles, when compared with the frequency with which witnesses lie or are mistaken, implies that it will always, or nearly always, be more probable that the testimony in favour of a miracle is mistaken than that the miracle occurred.<sup>23</sup>

Whatever else may be true of the incarnational narrative, it is abundantly clear that it is full of apparently miraculous and supernatural elements. In the Gospels, Jesus is represented as having a miraculous birth, being born of a virgin, with angels appearing to announce and celebrate the occasion. In his public ministry, Jesus shows supernatural knowledge, and performs many miracles and exorcisms. Finally, and most crucially, his execution is followed by his own resurrection from the dead. One might argue that many of the miracle stories belong to the 'details' rather than the basic outline of the story, and thus that the credibility of the narrative does not rest on the accuracy of any individual story. Even if this is so, however,

<sup>21</sup> See R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles* (Lewisburg, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 1981).

<sup>22</sup> See I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 59.

<sup>23</sup> See David Hume, 'Of Miracles', in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1977).

one could hardly argue that the narrative as a whole is reliable if *all* the miracle stories are historically false. And even if some or all of the earlier miracles are regarded as peripheral and dispensable, the Church has always regarded the resurrection of Jesus as its very foundation. For better or worse, the story seem inextricably tied to the miraculous, and a world that has difficulty believing in miracles cannot help but have difficulty accepting such a narrative as historical.

### 1.4.2. The Divorce of Fact and Value and the Denuding of the Meaning of History

The metaphysics of the Enlightenment, with its implicit or explicit embracement of a mechanistic view of nature, views the objective world as devoid of meaning and value; values and meanings must reside in the subject if they are to have any purchase at all in such a world. There is a profound divorce between facts and values. The world is as it is; 'values' are rooted in our attitudes towards it.

In such a world, it becomes difficult to see how *any* historical fact could have the profound significance traditional Christians ascribed to the incarnational narrative. In the words of C. S. Lewis, describing his attitude prior to his becoming a Christian, 'what I couldn't see was how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2000 years ago could help us here and now—except in so far as his *example* helped us'.<sup>24</sup> This means that even those who might see the *story* of the incarnation as significant in some way, have difficulty in seeing the importance of its factual, historical character. If contemporary people are to take seriously the historical character of the incarnational narrative, they must be able to see how it is possible for a historical event to have the kind of meaning traditional Christians claim.

<sup>24</sup> *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves* (1914–1963) ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 427.

### 1.4.3. Moral Difficulties With the Atonement

Of course part of the traditional Christian answer to the question as to why the incarnational narrative's historicity is significant to people in every age is the doctrine of the atonement. Though there are many theories of atonement, many answers to the question as to how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus constituted a victory over sin and death, most theories of atonement, and certainly the dominant ones, agree that the story recounted an objective achievement, an achievement with implications for everyone for whom Christ died.

Theories of atonement, however, especially the popular forms of 'substitutionary' atonement, rather than being the solution, are often seen as part of the problem. The idea that God forgives human sin by virtue of punishing an innocent figure in our place raises a host of moral difficulties. The Enlightenment emphasized a view of individuals as morally autonomous agents; I am responsible only for my own choices. Such a moral perspective poses many questions for theories of atonement: Why must God punish at all? If punishment is indeed necessary, how can guilt be transferred to someone else? How can the suffering of an innocent person take away my guilt? Perhaps these questions can be answered, but in the individualistic post-Enlightenment age, substitutionary theories of atonement seem unintelligible and morally dubious to many.

### 1.4.4. The Development of Critical Views of the New Testament

In the late eighteenth century, critical examination of the New Testament, and especially the four Gospels, began in earnest. Prior to this period, discrepancies between the accounts given in the four Gospels had of course been noticed, but there was a general assumption that such differences could be 'harmonized', though it was acknowledged that this was not always easy to do. Early in the eighteenth century, English deists and free-thinkers such as Anthony Collins, Thomas Woolston, Peter Annet, Thomas Chubb, and Matthew Tindal

had critically attacked orthodox defences of the reliability of the Gospels, focusing on difficulties with alleged miracles, supposedly fulfilled prophecies, and general discrepancies and historical implausibilities in the narratives.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, many follow Albert Schweitzer in viewing so-called 'higher' critical study of the New Testament as stemming from the fragments of the work of H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768) published by G. E. Lessing in 1778. Reimarus was a deistic free-thinker who developed a reading of the Gospels which saw them as a deceptive attempt on the part of the disciples to cover up the death of Jesus. Reimarus believed that hidden within this unhistorical account one could discern the outlines of the real Jesus, who was a failed revolutionary. Though the 'fraud hypothesis' of Reimarus is generally dismissed, his theories anticipated many later developments in historical criticism. Reimarus is important for simply treating the Gospels as ordinary historical documents, with no presumption of divine inspiration or even reliability. Perhaps even more important is the attitude of critical suspicion adopted towards the documents, the sense that to learn what really happened one must look through the texts and not take them at face value.

What began as a trickle with Reimarus became a flood after the publication of D. F. Strauss's *Life of Jesus* in Germany in 1835.<sup>26</sup> Prior to Strauss there had been no shortage of rationalists who were sceptical of the miraculous and supernatural elements in the Gospels, but, with some exceptions, the assumption had been that the accounts had the credibility of eyewitness sources, and thus the tendency had been to look for naturalistic or reductionistic explanations of the supposed miracles. Strauss clear-headedly followed Reimarus in discarding the notion that the Gospels are eyewitness accounts, by viewing them as containing great amounts of legendary and mythical accretions of the sort that frequently grow up around religious leaders after their death. The way was clear to investigate these documents to determine if any genuine historical

<sup>25</sup> Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 56. For more extended treatments of such figures see Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>26</sup> D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972). Originally published as *Das Leben Jesu* in 1835.

knowledge could be wrested from them, or, as was the case for Strauss himself, to attempt to extract from the mythical material itself a true philosophical meaning.<sup>27</sup>

With Strauss the floodgates to this kind of historical-critical analysis opened, initially in Germany, but eventually extending to England and the United States as well. Such 'higher criticism' (the term distinguishes this kind of historical criticism from the less controversial textual or 'lower' criticism) is today pursued on all sides using a variety of sophisticated methods. The Gospels are analysed from such perspectives as 'source criticism', 'form criticism', and 'redaction criticism'. Source criticism examines the text to discern what earlier sources may be discerned within it. With respect to the four Gospels, for example, it is commonly argued that Mark was written prior to Matthew and Luke. The latter two Gospels draw not only on Mark, but on another hypothetical document, designated 'Q'. Source criticism looks not only for obvious cases of literary dependence, but for tensions, discrepancies, 'fissures' in the text, that point to divergent sources that the final author or editor has combined.

Form criticism examines the Gospel narratives by looking at more or less self-contained passages or 'pericopes', which are assumed to be elements that were circulated and passed down in the Early Church, and which underwent a process of reshaping through such transmission. These pericopes were then arranged in various ways by the authors of the Gospels. The task of the critic is not only to classify the various types of material by their 'forms' but to understand them in light of the sociological situation of the Early Church which preserved and perhaps in some cases created them. From this perspective, much of the material in the Gospels tells us more about the problems and needs of the Early Church than about the historical Jesus.

Redaction criticism views the evangelists, and their predecessors who authored whatever sources the authors of the Gospels employed, not so much as passive compilers of inherited traditions, but as active authors, who edited or

<sup>27</sup> See the discussions of Strauss in Morgan with Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, and in Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.

'redacted' the materials for theological purposes. Redaction criticism is a quite different enterprise from form criticism, though the two ways of looking at the texts are by no means incompatible. There is in fact an underlying similarity; both tend to assume that the documents are not reliable history. Rather, redaction criticism sees the evangelists as authors who felt free to rewrite or even create narratives for theological purposes, much as form criticism sees pericopes as created and shaped by the larger Church communities for their purposes.

In all of this work there is a general assumption that the writers of the Gospels had little genuine historical interest, and almost no critical historical judgement in the contemporary sense. Rather, there is a strong presumption that many of the incidents described in the Gospels are recounted for theological, liturgical, or polemical reasons, rather than because they occurred. If any genuine historical knowledge can be extracted from the Gospels, it can only be wrested from them with great ingenuity, and, in comparison with traditional beliefs, what can be gained looks quite scanty to many critics.

This is far from true of all biblical scholars. It would be a mistake to think that the defender of the incarnational narrative must necessarily be opposed to such critical study of the Bible. Though many of the critics have come to conclusions that seem to undermine the credibility of the narrative, others argue that at least the basic outlines of the narrative can survive such critical scrutiny intact. It would in any case be foolish to deny that such historical, critical studies of the Bible have led to important new discoveries and insights, including ones that have positive significance for the life of the Church. For the defender of the narrative, the problem is not critical study of the Bible *per se*, but the conclusions and assumptions of particular critics. Nevertheless, although such critical methods themselves do not necessarily lead to scepticism about the narrative, it seems clear that they have created a cultural situation in which widespread scepticism is easier and belief in the historical credibility of the narrative is more difficult. The defender of the narrative, therefore, will rightly look with a critical eye at the assumptions embedded in the methods of particular critics, while being careful not to oppose critical studies in general. After all, the truly critical scholar will be

open to critical reflection on the methods of criticism itself, and methods that make possible new insights and discoveries may also contain limitations and blind-spots.

It is a very interesting question as to whether sceptical attacks by critical scholars on the veracity of the New Testament are more a product or a cause of the anti-super-naturalistic attitude which the Enlightenment produced. I am inclined to say that originally such work is best viewed as an outgrowth of the kind of Enlightenment assumptions I have briefly discussed. Such critics as Strauss simply assumed that the universe is a closed, naturalistic system, and that miraculous accounts must be legendary or mythical. However, once biblical criticism is in full flower, I believe the relationship becomes more complex. One barrier to anti-supernaturalism is precisely a vigorous belief that miracles have occurred; people who read the Gospel narratives as historically reliable naturally reject a world-view that posits the impossibility of supernatural events. The development of plausible accounts of the New Testament that dismiss such events as unhistorical thus can strengthen the kind of naturalistic view that originally gave rise to such readings.

## 1.5. The Post-Modern Situation

In light of these Enlightenment-inspired developments, it is easy to see why many theologians have grave doubts about the wisdom of linking Christian faith to the historical character of the incarnational narrative. To say that the intellectual climate of modernity has not been hospitable to traditional Christian faith would be an understatement.

It is generally recognized, however, that our intellectual situation has changed significantly. We now live in a 'post-modern' world, though there are many radically different accounts of what this new situation is supposed to be like. Theologians and Biblical scholars have certainly recognized this intellectual shift to various degrees and in various ways. I am convinced, however, that a great deal of what is presented as 'post-modern theology' still continues to incorporate some of the Enlightenment assumptions that constitute the essence

of modernity. The time is ripe for a thorough rethinking of the problem of the historical foundations of Christian faith, and the modern biblical and historical scholarship that has shaped the terms of the debate.

What do I mean in speaking of the post-modern intellectual situation as contrasted with the mind-set of modernity? Let me first say what I do not mean. I do not wish to claim, as do many post-modernist thinkers, that we must embrace a perspective that mixes together relativism, subjectivism, and scepticism. I have no doubt that there is an objective world, and that it is possible for human beings to have knowledge of it and reasonable, true beliefs about it. Rather, as I am using the term, to accept our situation as post-modern is simply to recognize the collapse of the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of the Enlightenment.

Specifically, in our post-modern situation, we have no good grounds for assuming that the natural world is a closed mechanistic system. Nor do we have any good reasons for accepting the epistemological assumptions common to both rationalists and empiricists since the Enlightenment: those of classical foundationalism. The classical foundationalist affirms that human knowledge must rest on foundations free from the possibility of error, or as free from error as possible, and that the beliefs built on these foundations must be constructed by equally sturdy means. Such epistemologies are often linked with an ethic of belief that holds that beliefs not held on such grounds are improper. I believe that much theology and historical, biblical scholarship from the Enlightenment to the present is strongly shaped by a blend of this kind of evidentialist epistemology and often unconsciously held naturalistic metaphysical assumptions.

Of course, historical biblical scholarship is the product of many other factors as well; it stems from genuine historical curiosity, tensions and inconsistencies in the Bible itself, and many other things, and it would be a gross exaggeration to say that it merely is the product of Enlightenment philosophy. My claim that a changed philosophical scene means the time is ripe for rethinking such scholarship is by no means to be construed as a wholesale rejection of contemporary biblical scholarship.

Still, my own sense is that if biblical scholars really engaged

with contemporary epistemological theories, the field would be significantly altered, and altered for the good. The implications of this would be particularly dramatic with respect to the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus. New Testament scholars have certainly sensed that the post-modern intellectual situation will change things, and have responded in a variety of ways. One possibility that has been explored is to give up the quest for historicity altogether and be content with literary analyses of the Gospels.<sup>28</sup> I will say more about the value of these kinds of study as well as the difficulties connected with the loss of concern for historicity later on. At this point I simply want to say that on my view the post-modern situation provides new opportunities for looking at the historical issues. On this point, at least, I am pleased to cite respected New Testament scholar Ben Meyer as concurring: 'It follows that with a *basic breakthrough* in the account of knowledge the modern Christian dilemma might be radically resolved, cracked open, and the way cleared for constructive projects irreducible to theological salvage operations.'<sup>29</sup>

Contemporary Biblical scholarship in its more sceptical forms and the theology that is based on it needs to be critically examined from its foundations to its conclusions, given the post-modern intellectual situation. I do not propose, however, simply to argue from a sociological situation. That is, we are not entitled to assume that, because our intellectual situation has changed, the change represents progress, and it would be simply unphilosophical to assume that we must uncritically accept the convictions of 'post-modernism', even if we could identify them. That kind of intellectual error can be found in the writings of the theologians and biblical scholars I propose to criticize; writers such as Rudolf Bultmann and Gordon Kaufman frequently seem to assume that we must somehow take for granted the thought-forms of 'modern man'.<sup>30</sup> I make

<sup>28</sup> The amount of work developing such a literary approach to the Bible is already large. For a good example of a critic who bypasses historical questions, see R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). See p. 56 where Culpepper discusses how 'his story' can be true even if it is not 'history' if we learn to look at the text as a mirror instead of seeing it as a window.

<sup>29</sup> Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 15–16.

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Bultmann's famous statement that 'it is impossible to use electrical light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles', in *Kerygma and Myth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 5. Much of Gordon Kaufman's theological work begins from the assumption that the philosophical conclusions of Kant and Hume have made traditional religious belief untenable. See for example his book, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972). Bultmann's claim is in fact false as sociology; there are many educated persons who use electricity and visit physicians, and continue to believe in miracles and spiritual beings. If Bultmann has some argument up his sleeve designed to show that they are irrational to behave in this way, then this argument needs to be placed on the table. Kaufman's claim reflects a deplorable tendency on the part of theologians to defer to what is perceived as assured philosophical conclusions, when the truly philosophical attitude puts into question whether there can be such a thing.

no such assumptions on behalf of either modernity or post-modernism. That is not to make the silly claim that I, unlike those modernist scholars, am free from the biases of my age. It is simply to affirm that no such bias is beyond challenge.

## 1.6. The Plan of Attack

I propose to begin with a brief review of the responses of modernity to the Enlightenment challenge to historically rooted religious faith, and an analysis of the unsatisfactory character of each of those options. I shall then take a fresh look at why history matters for Christian faith by giving an account of what would be lost if it were determined that the *events* recounted in the incarnational narrative did not occur. In this connection we must take a look at the question as to whether theological doctrines such as the atonement still have existential relevance and make intellectual sense. Following this, I shall argue for the value of historicity in the other sense of ‘history’, in which reference is made to the narrative itself as an account. Granted the importance of the *events*, it is crucially important to have knowledge of those events as well.

Of course it is one thing to argue that it is important for Christians that the events occurred and that we have knowledge of them. It is quite another to ask whether they *did* occur, and whether we *do* have knowledge of them. The main body of this book will tackle these questions. I shall look first at the possibility of the narrative: could the story be true? Is the story logically coherent, and consistent with contemporary scientific knowledge? We must examine the charge that the narrative

embodies logically contradictory ideas, and the basic question as to whether a story that embodies supernatural and miraculous elements can be taken seriously.

It is of course not enough to know that the story could be true. What we want to know is whether it is true, and whether we can know it to be true. Here we must examine the contemporary epistemological terrain, and see if there are viable theories of knowledge and belief that will allow us to construct a plausible account of how anyone could have such knowledge.

I shall examine two different types of theological accounts of how knowledge of the incarnational narrative is possible, and assess their viability in the contemporary epistemological situation. These two accounts are an evidentialist model, that understands knowledge of the story as derived from ordinary historical evidence, and what I shall term the Reformed account, that describes the knowledge as the product of the work of the Holy Spirit within the life of the person. I shall try to show that these two stories are not really rivals but are complementary. Both have difficulties but these difficulties can be overcome if we reject the Enlightenment epistemologies that have often framed the discussion. I shall try to show the value of one particular contemporary epistemological theory, that of externalism. There are many different forms of externalism but I shall take the core insight as a sense that knowledge is something that is achieved when the knower has the right kind of relation to reality. We gain knowledge when our beliefs can be said to 'track' reality, to use Robert Nozick's suggestive phrase.<sup>31</sup> Knowledge is not necessarily a matter of having evidence, though that is one way a belief can acquire a 'truth-conducive ground'. Knowledge may simply be the result of reliable processes, or truth-oriented faculties, operating as they were designed to operate. Such an epistemology is particularly helpful in showing how these two different theological accounts may be combined.

In the end, I argue that though each account has a plausible story to tell, a combined account provides the best picture of how such religious historical knowledge is possible. In the

<sup>31</sup> Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 167–288.

light of this account, I shall argue that the claim to know the truth of the incarnational narrative as historical is reasonable and plausible. The defence of this claim will require an analysis of both the value and the limitations of some kinds of contemporary critical New Testament scholarship for those who are not New Testament scholars, among whom I certainly class myself. I shall try to show that despite the large amount of valuable scholarly work done on the questions, in the end individuals must answer for themselves the question, 'What do I know about the historical Jesus?' Having answered that question, one can then go on to ask the really important questions: 'What is the significance of this Jesus?' 'In the light of what I know about him, what should my relation to him be, and what does that mean for the way I live my life?' This book, however, will focus mainly on the preliminary question, for if Jesus is not an actual historical figure whom I can know, then it is all too likely that the Jesus to which I attach significance will be merely a creation of my own imagination.