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The Logic of Belief and the Content of God:
Hans Frei's Theological Grammar

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I, Frances M. Henderson, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 95,000 words in length, has been written by me; that it is the record of work carried out by me; and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

To my parents

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Abbreviations

CD Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, (London & New York: T&T Clark International, 2004).

Abstract

This thesis offers a systematic engagement with the theological hermeneutics of Hans Frei. The two key conceptual categories are “the logic of belief” and “the content of God”.

The former refers to the grammatical ordering of theological statements: Frei is concerned to distinguish grammatical logic from ontology, and to establish the actual starting point for any given theological enterprise. Frei’s own preference for a “linear” and “cumulative” method built upon the starting point of a realistic narrative reading of the gospels is unpacked and explored.

The second category, “the content of God”, refers to Frei’s search for an account in which God has actual reality, as opposed to a mere metaphysical abstraction. Indeed, for Frei, the arrival – or failure to arrive – at a ‘concrete’ account of God is the test of any theological starting point, as evidenced in the ability or otherwise to do exegetical justice to the narrative shape of the crucifixion-resurrection sequence. The thesis demonstrates that for Frei, the starting point in the logic of belief must be the identity of Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture, and only on that basis can a concrete content of God be posited.

In so doing, the intention is to set Frei very firmly within his mid-twentieth century context, in particular his engagement with and ultimate rejection of existentialist and Neo-orthodox theology. Accordingly, the thesis traces the development in Frei’s thinking of these two conceptual categories, from his doctoral thesis on Barth’s early theology up to and including his twin publications, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974) and *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (1975). Later works by Frei are also considered in relation to these.

The thesis does not stop at the mid-twentieth century, but illustrates the continued relevance of Frei’s hermeneutical theology into this century, putting him in conversation with a number of systematic and biblical theologians. Suggestions are made as to his applicability to modern theological concerns, including the debate surrounding the being and action of God: a field where he has yet to be deployed successfully.

INTRODUCTION

When you are criticising the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which ... the epoch unconsciously presuppose[s]. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming ... With these assumptions a certain limited number of types of philosophic systems are possible, this group constitutes the philosophy of the epoch.¹

Alfred North Whitehead, 1925.

Very often, especially in theology, scholars start off from shared convictions, a “common sense” in the best sense of that term, shared views and a shared sensibility, and then relentlessly press some element in that amalgam, untying one knot after another, until at some psychological point a common vocabulary and a shared sensibility turn into a technical, often esoteric special-school outlook.²

Hans W. Frei

1. The Questions

Revelation is all very well.

But the invocation of a doctrine of revelation when speaking of the God known to faith immediately opens out a host of related questions. One set of these questions is epistemological. God speaks: but how do we hear? Where do we hear? Even, does it matter if we hear or not? The second set of questions is ontological. God speaks: but *who* is this God who is speaking? What is the content of this revealing God? What is the relation between God’s revelation, and God’s own self; or between epistemology and ontology? And if we even get thus far, a third set of questions is grammatical and doctrinal. Having been the recipients of revelation – having been given insight into the being of God – how are we then to explain the process? In what order should we arrange our thinking about God? Should we speak first of

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, (Cambridge, 1925), 71.

² Hans W. Frei, “Epilogue: George Lindbeck and The Nature of Doctrine”, in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 275–82, 276.

ontology? Or is it more logical to speak first of the knowledge of God? What faulty human words should we use to speak about the almighty and living God? And if we cannot adequately express in doctrine what we have heard, does revelation have any effective meaning at all?

These three sets of questions, epistemological, ontological, and grammatical, together represent something of the breadth and scope of Hans Frei's work. A theologian of supreme analytical skills, his concern from the beginning was with the doctrine of revelation, in its various liberal and postliberal guises. His instinct was always to probe beneath: *on what basis is that statement predicated?* Hence even the title of his 1956 doctoral thesis: *The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth, 1909–1922: the Nature of Barth's Break with Liberalism*.³ Not content with understanding Barth's theology, he wanted to understand where Barth's theology had come from. The originality of Frei's thesis lies initially in its focus on Barth's early theology, from Barth's first published contribution to the periodical, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*⁴ in 1909, through his 'break' with the liberal tradition, and culminating with the publication of the second edition of *Der Römerbrief*.⁵ This was a significant pre-dating of Barth's 'early theology' as it was commonly understood in the English-speaking theological world, in which the English translation of *Der Römerbrief* in 1933 had marked the beginning of Barthian studies. Frei, therefore, is not so much interested in Barth's later supposed conversion *away from* dialectical theology, a move which Hans Urs von Balthasar⁶ had located in Barth's 1931 book on Anselm.⁷ Rather, Frei's interest is in Barth's initial conversion *to* dialectical

³ Hans W. Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth, 1909–1922: The Nature of Barth's Break with Liberalism*, (Yale University: Doctoral Thesis, 1956).

⁴ Karl Barth, "Moderne Theologie und Reichsgottesarbeit", in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, (1909), 317-321.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*. (Munich: Kaiser, Christian, 1922). English Translation: Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1933). Unless specifically identified as a reference to the 1st edition from 1919, any subsequent reference to *Der Römerbrief* should be understood as referring to this second edition.

⁶ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth, Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, (Köln: J. Hegner, 1951). English Translation: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, (San Francisco: Communio Books, Ignatius Press, 1992).

⁷ Karl Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes im Zusammenhang seines theologischen Programms*, (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1931). English Translation: Karl Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselm's proof of the existence of God in the context of his theological scheme* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975).

theology, and the shift in understanding of the doctrine of revelation that that entailed. After a gap of nearly twenty years, during which time he contributed only essays and articles, Frei's next major publication was the 1974 book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*⁸: another exercise designed to establish *how we got to where we are*. Such projects of excavation are absolutely symptomatic of Frei's careful, probing, analytical method.

2. Current scholarship on Hans Frei

Frei has been credited with founding an entire 'school' of 'postliberal' theology. Certainly, he was the first to use the term 'postliberal' "in the relevant sense"⁹, to denote the break with nineteenth century liberal theology as instituted in 1922 by the publication of Karl Barth's *Der Römerbrief*.¹⁰ Later, the term was picked up by his friend and colleague, George Lindbeck, who reproduced it in his 1984 title, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*.¹¹ Between them, Frei and Lindbeck taught a whole generation of theologians at Yale Divinity School, with the result that their influence is pervasive in current theology, so that their ideas are in evidence even when they are not directly referenced.

A complicating factor is that the postliberal school of theology is sometimes also known as the "Yale School". Whether the Yale School does in fact exist or not is disputed: George Hunsinger, a former student of Frei's, claims that it "enjoys little basis in reality, being largely the invention of theological journalism".¹² Meanwhile,

⁸ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974.

⁹ George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology", in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42–57, 45. For Frei's first use of the term "postliberal", see Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 430.

¹⁰ This history of Barth's break with liberalism has been well documented, first of all by Frei himself in his doctoral thesis, and later by Bruce L. McCormack in *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). As such, it need not be repeated here.

¹¹ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

¹² Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology", 42.

David Ford prefers to be cagey on the issue, referring merely to a “so-called” Yale School.¹³ Certainly, it is true that the candidates for inclusion in this school, students and/or colleagues of Frei and/or Lindbeck, are a diverse bunch: Hunsinger mentions as possible contenders Brevard Childs, David Kelsey, Paul Holmer, Stanley Hauerwas, William Placher, Bruce Marshall, Ronald Thiemann, Kathryn Tanner, and himself, among others. Nevertheless, its theological ‘opponents’ seem to be able to identify the Yale School with more certainty: Bruce McCormack identifies a defining characteristic of the ‘Yale theologians’ as being a “preoccupation with exegesis”¹⁴ and an *ad hoc* “realistic narrative” hermeneutic.¹⁵ In addition, even sympathetic readers such as Paul DeHart¹⁶ or Mike Higton can name and define a ‘Yale School’, although Higton is rightly careful to distinguish Frei from the more general category.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Robert Jenson describes Frei as the “chief heremeneuticist in the recent “Yale school” of American theology”¹⁸; while John Allan Knight is able to write in one phrase of “Hans Frei and the ‘Yale School’ of narrative theology he inaugurated”.¹⁹ Whether the ‘Yale School’ exists or not seems to be very much a matter of whose opinion one solicits.

Beyond this confusion of labels, the issue is further complicated by the fact that Frei’s influence is not confined to any one area of theology. As a Barth scholar, for example, he is at the centre of much current debate over the correct interpretation and appropriation of that theologian. Sometimes he is aligned with Barth and thus

¹³ David F. Ford, “Hans Frei and the Future of Theology”, *Modern Theology* 8:2 (1992), 203–214, 207.

¹⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, “Forward”, in Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), ix–xi, ix.

¹⁵ McCormack, “Forward”, x.

¹⁶ See Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

¹⁷ “George Lindbeck’s book *The Nature of Doctrine* is often taken as a manifesto for a supposed ‘Yale school’, comprising Lindbeck himself, David Kelsey, Ronald Thiemann, Garrett Green and several others. The work of the late Hans Frei (1922–1988) is normally seen as central to this school, and his difficult writings are often explained by recourse to, and assumed to be adequately represented by, *The Nature of Doctrine*.” Mike Higton, “Frei’s Christology and Lindbeck’s Cultural-Linguistic Theory”, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997), 83–95, 83.

¹⁸ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: The Works of God*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 275.

¹⁹ John Allan Knight, “The Barthian Heritage of Hans W. Frei”, in *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (2008), 307–326, 307.

condemned, as when Francesca Aran Murphy labels him disparagingly as a “story Barthian”²⁰. At other times his whole interpretation of Barth is called into question, and the condemnation this time is for getting Barth wrong. Bruce McCormack, for example, devotes some footnote space to refuting Frei’s reading of the first edition of *Der Römerbrief*, that Barth had not yet fully broken with liberal-style “relationalism”²¹, and in more general terms, consistently ‘blames’ Frei for what he perceives as a general misreading of Barth in North American theology.²² On the other hand, George Hunsinger credits Frei’s doctoral thesis with being “still the best study of Barth’s theology available in English at the level of conceptual analysis and richness of cultural-historical detail”²³; while Frei is praised by David Ford for his interpretation of Barth’s theology which “allowed Barth to be given a fresh, provocative reading different from most ‘Barthians’ and ‘anti-Barthians’”.²⁴

However, Barth studies is only one of the theological fields where Frei’s voice continues to be heard. Putting Barth to one side, Frei remains one of the most influential hermeneuticians of our time. Kevin Vanhoozer, for example, credits Frei with “convincingly” documenting “the devastating effect of the critical method on the theological interpretation of Scripture” in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*²⁵, while Nicholas Wolterstorff takes a considered and critical view in a number of

²⁰ Murphy, Francesca Aran, *God is Not a Story*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 151.

²¹ McCormack, *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 147n.64.

²² See, for example, “Revelation and History in Transfoundationalist Perspective: Karl Barth’s Theological Epistemology in Conversation with a Schleiermacherian Tradition”, in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 21–39. Here, McCormack names Frei as one who wrongly understands Barth “as a narrative or “intratextual” theologian” albeit “more cautiously” than he names Lindbeck (23n.5). Moreover, this interpretation has given rise to a “present” situation in which “Barth is most often understood as a nonfoundationalist narrative theologian and, for some, a precursor of postmodern, even deconstructionalist tendencies” (22–3). McCormack, by contrast, is more interested in interpreting Barth according to his 19th century heritage.

²³ George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of his Theology*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 286n.

²⁴ David F. Ford, “On Being Theologically Hospitable to Jesus Christ: Hans Frei’s Achievement”, in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 46, (October 1995), 532–46, 532.

²⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Scripture and Tradition”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149–69, 151.

articles.²⁶ Meanwhile, Frei's recovery of the 'literal sense' of the biblical narratives has had far reaching implications for theology and exegesis, not least with reference to Lindbeck's concept of "intratextuality".²⁷ Frei is also of great relevance to those theologians whose interest is in methodology²⁸, while his biblical hermeneutics have been the shared subject of three full length comparative monographs, the first by David Demson²⁹ in 1997, then by John David Dawson³⁰ in 2002, and finally by Richard Topping³¹ in 2007.

Moreover, on the back of his biblical hermeneutics, Frei's name is referenced frequently in the realm of christology, of biblical interpretation, and of studies in the historical Jesus. Biblical scholar David Lee has produced a full-length book on the theological reading of Luke's Gospel according to Frei's methods.³² Meanwhile, in the recent interdisciplinary project, *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*³³, Frei is cited alike by academics in the fields of systematic theology and of biblical history and interpretation: in the former camp he is appropriated by William Placher and Katherine Sonderegger; and in the latter by Marcus Bockmuehl, Joel Marcus, Dale Allison Jr, Francis Watson, and A. Katherine Grieb. Lastly, Frei has proved of

²⁶ See, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Will narrativity work as lynchpin? Reflections of the hermeneutic of Hans Frei", in Charles M. Lewis (ed.), *Relativism and Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), pp. 71–107.

²⁷ By "intratextuality", Lindbeck is noting the Reformed principle of *scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (*The Nature of Doctrine*, 118), and extending it to embrace the use of Christian language within the Christian community: "Meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it. Thus the proper way to determine what "God" signifies, for example, is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly" (114)

²⁸ See, for example, Marguerite Abdul-Masih, *Edward Schillebeeckx and Hans Frei: A Conversation on Method and Christology*, (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001).

²⁹ David E. Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

³⁰ John David Dawson, *Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Christian Identity in Boyarin, Auerbach, and Frei*, (California: The University of California Press, 2002).

³¹ Richard R. Topping, *Revelation, Scripture and Church: Theological Hermeneutic Thought of James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei*, (Aldershot : Ashgate, 2007).

³² David Lee, *Luke's Stories of Jesus: Theological Reading of Gospel Narrative and the Legacy of Hans Frei*, (Sheffield : Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

³³ Gaventa, Beverly Roberts & Hays, Richard B. eds. *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).

interest to the field of homiletics.³⁴ In particular, Charles Campbell's book, *Preaching Jesus*³⁵, as well as suggesting what a truly 'postliberal' sermon might look like, also manages to be one of the most insightful introductions to Frei's theology available.

The reader, then, should expect Frei's name to appear in any number of theological, biblical, hermeneutical, and homiletical treatises. Moreover, he is the continuing subject of many shorter essays and articles, some of which are listed below.³⁶ However, there are few full length studies available which encompass the whole of Hans Frei's theology. Campbell's particular focus aside, currently the only one available is Mike Higton's *Christ, Providence & History*.³⁷ The stated purpose of this book is to explore how Frei "painstakingly calls theologians to a public task"³⁸; the unspoken project may perhaps be seen as an attempt to redeem Frei's theology, with its emphasis on the specific narratives of the Christian faith and the distinctiveness of Christian language³⁹, from accusations of sectarianism. There is a strong tendency within 'postliberalism' or the 'Yale School' towards an almost entirely self-referential conceptualisation of church and theology. For all that this is an option which Frei rejects under the fifth of his "Types" of Christian theology, he is vulnerable to this kind of accusation whenever he is associated too closely with

³⁴ Notable recent examples include Richard L. Eslinger, "Tracking the Homiletical Plot"; and David Buttrick, "Story and Symbol: The Stuff of Preaching", in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching: Essays in honor of Eugene L. Lowry*, ed. Mike Graves & David J. Schlafer (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 69–86 and 99–114 respectively.

³⁵ Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

³⁶ See, for example, Jason A. Springs, "Between Barth and Wittgenstein: On the Availability of Hans Frei's Later Theology", in *Modern Theology* 23, (2007) 393–413; M. A. Higton, "Hans Frei and David Tracy on the Ordinary and the Extraordinary in Christianity", *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 79, 566–91; William W. Young III, "The Identity of the Literal sense: Midrash in the Work of Hans Frei", in *Journal of Religion* Vol. 85 (2005), 609–33; and others cited in this introduction.

³⁷ Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence & History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology*, (T&T Clark Ltd, 2004).

³⁸ Higton, *Christ, Providence & History*, 1.

³⁹ See Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992). Of particular interest is his description of his preferred "Type 4: Karl Barth" (38–46), in which Frei agrees with Barth, that "Theology is Christian self-description first" (38). For this reason, he refutes all 'external' bases for the theological enterprise, and largely approves of Barth's insistence, that "fundamental theology – or as he [Barth] calls it, Prolegomena – is internal to, part of, the dogmatic enterprise". (39)

some of his peers. After all, it is a short road from George Lindbeck's theories of "intratextuality" to the self-referencing confessional community envisaged by Stanley Hauerwas.⁴⁰

Whether Frei, Lindbeck, or indeed Hauerwas, deserves to be categorised as 'sectarian' or otherwise is beyond the scope of this thesis, which is not intended to be an apologetic for postliberal theology in general. However, where the subtlety and distinctiveness of Frei's thought has been lost through his inclusion under the 'postliberal' or 'Yale School' labels, it has been necessary at times to extract him. Not every follower of a founder's principles has fully understood those principles, and even if they have, they are free to adapt them for their own ends. Moreover, for all that Lindbeck and Frei shared concern with church language and practices, they did in fact approach the task of theology from quite opposite starting points:

The logic of Frei's theology tended to move from the particular to the general, and from the confessional to the methodological; the logic of Lindbeck's theology moved more or less in the opposite direction.⁴¹

Hunsinger's point here about the grammatical logic of Frei's theology is no mere formal difference, but is central to Frei's whole project, so that he should rightly be differentiated from Lindbeck from the start. In addition, as pointed out by Mike Higton, Frei's approach was determinedly christocentric, whereas "Lindbeck manages to present the whole of his cultural-linguistic theory without Christology appearing as anything other than an illustration".⁴² Lastly, although Frei himself largely approved of Lindbeck's project, this was not an unqualified approval. Frei's abiding concern for theological realism led him to be ever so slightly wary of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory of doctrine: theology is, but is also so much more than, grammatical logic. Hence Frei confesses, "half under my breath ... to some *qualified* sympathy for the moderate propositionalists"⁴³ who, upon reading *The Nature of Doctrine*, might protest that what Lindbeck "says about doctrines as second-order rules is sufficiently kin to doctrines as first-order propositional

⁴⁰ See in particular Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁴¹ Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology", 43.

⁴² Higton, "Frei's Christology and Lindbeck's Cultural-Linguistic Theory", 94.

⁴³ Frei, "Epilogue", 279.

statements that he could allow second-order doctrines about the Trinity, atonement, etc., to have the character not only of intra-systemic but ontological truth statements.”⁴⁴ For all their similarities, it is crucial to this project to note that the *differences* between Frei and Lindbeck – and with Lindbeck, much of the postliberal tradition – are situated precisely within the category of the grammatical order of belief with which we are so concerned.

3. The Doctrine of Revelation: A brief historical survey

Let us say it again: revelation is all very well.

Certainly, it is the epistemological foundation of all specifically Christian doctrines: those which pertain to the knowledge of God and God’s works which do not fall under the heading of ‘natural theology’, but which are the particular preserve of the Christian religion. Further, the doctrine of revelation is the essential epistemological corollary of the equally foundational ontological premise: that of the being and sovereignty of God. In other words, there can be no other starting point for a specifically Christian theology than this: that God’s being, absolute and transcendent, is known to us only in gracious revelation. Thus the great Confessions of the Reformed faith⁴⁵ all begin with a side-by-side assertion of the two. For example, the Westminster Confession (1646) states this most unequivocally at the very start, in one sentence relegating the vexed question of natural religion to secondary status, and declaring scripture to be the one, truest source of revelation:

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself ... and afterwards ... to commit the same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary ...⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid. 278.

⁴⁵ By which I mean specifically *The Scots Confession* (1560); the *First* (1536) and *Second* (1562–4) *Helvetic Confessions*; *The Belgic Confession* (1619); and *The Westminster Confession* (1646). For the full text of these Confessions, see *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*. ed. James T. Dennison, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008).

⁴⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1: “Of the Holy Scripture”.

Only once revelation has thus been established as the source of our knowledge of God, does the *Confession* then proceed to the content of that revelation in the next chapter: “Of God, and of the Holy Trinity”. Similarly, *The Scots Confession* (1560) in its Preface establishes Scripture as “the mouth of God”, before embarking on the first chapter, “Of God”. *The Belgic Confession* (revised version 1619) reverses the procedure, beginning with “Article 1: *De Natura Dei*”, before proceeding to “Article 2: *De Cognitione Dei*”. Meanwhile, *The Second Helvetic Confession* devotes two whole chapters to Scripture and its interpretation before finally arriving at the unity and triunity of God in Chapter 3. Whatever way round these Confessions approach the task of theology, it is clear that though they cannot both be spoken of at once, and must therefore have their own chapters, yet for all practical purposes, the being and the knowledge of God are inseparable.

Following on from the wide-ranging deistic movements of the Enlightenment, the theologians of the nineteenth century rediscovered the doctrine of revelation with something of a sigh of relief. Although it had to undergo many modifications to render it acceptable to modern ears – most notably the divorce of revelation from Scripture – nevertheless, as Schleiermacher and his liberal descendents found,⁴⁷ the doctrine was *useful*. Here, in this ancient doctrine, was on offer an epistemological scheme which could preserve whole God’s transcendence from the dissection skills of the scientific historian.

The twentieth century picked up the liberal concern with revelation, and once more shook it about. Indeed, in a lecture to theology students in 1975, Frei posited under the heading, “Contemporary Issues in Theology”, that “the *great* pervasive issue 1920–1970 was *what is revelation?*” Expanding on his theme, he continued, “What kind of knowledge is it? Before Christian theologians talked about God, they tried to

⁴⁷ Specifically, this label of ‘liberal theology’ is applied here to the German ‘school’ which stemmed from Friedrich Schleiermacher, and was developed variously by Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Ernst Troeltsch, and Wilhelm Herrman, among others. For a comprehensive definition of nineteenth century German ‘liberal’ theologians, whose scope and variety is dampened by such a catch-all label, see Christina Axt-Piscalar’s essay, “Liberal Theology in Germany”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth Century Theology*, ed. David Fergusson, (Wiley-Blackwell, March 2010).

settle (the) question of *knowledge* of God.”⁴⁸ And as Frei explained to his students, after the 1922 publication of *Der Römerbrief*, the question of the knowledge of God was assumed by most Protestant theologians to be answerable only within a dialectical matrix, in which “relationship to God (was seen as) totally indirect, across an absolute barrier man could not cross”:

‘Revelation’ in [the] first place was contact with God [which] man cannot provide for himself: Not a heightening of ordinary insight. Secondly, revelation does not take away the barrier but miraculously crosses it: Man remains forever limited: Revelation (is) not direct, special or mystical insight. (It must always come to man as event ‘now’; Man never possesses it, only receives it. Revelation [is] never behind him.) Thirdly, revelation then means a trusting abiding in non-knowing of God. God is hidden in his revelation.⁴⁹

In short, the project of the ‘dialectical’, or ‘*krisis*’⁵⁰ theologians was to eliminate any preconditions in this world for revelation, and so to pass control of the knowledge of God back into the hands of God. Therefore, despite its most comprehensive rebellion against the central liberal idea of an immanent, or generally available revelation, the ‘post-liberal’ twentieth century never abandoned its concern with the revealing God. The doctrine of revelation, thus redefined, was as useful in its turn to the generations of ‘*krisis*’ theologians as it had been to their ‘liberal’ forebears, intent as they were now on wrenching apart God and world.

Revelation, then, is all very well: but how revelation is understood to function epistemologically; and the relation of revelation to the being of the God who reveals; and the grammatical rules concerning how we should order our understanding of God in revelation – these are all up for grabs. To illustrate: is revelation general in nature? Available to all humanity? Available only in scripture? Indeed, is the meaning of scripture itself available to all humanity, or only to those who have been divinely inspired to read with faith? Is revelation still a divine speech-act even if no one hears it? And once revelation has been heard, can it then be humanly owned?

⁴⁸ Hans W, Frei, unpublished notes from the lecture series, “Contemporary Issues in Theology”, delivered January-March 1975. This citation from Lecture 2, delivered January 16th 1975.

⁴⁹ Frei, “Contemporary Issues”. This citation from Lecture 4, delivered January 23rd, 1975.

⁵⁰ ‘*Krisis*’ is a term introduced to theology by Barth in *Der Römerbrief*. Briefly, it is used to describe the plight of a humanity which is unable to cross the dialectic between world and God. The *krisis* is in fact God’s ‘No!’ to any attempt on our part to do so: “We stand here ... before a penetrating and ultimate KRISIS, before the supremacy of a negation by which all existence is rolled up.” (Barth, *Romans*, 91.) The new generation of theologians who embraced Barth’s dialectical scheme became known in English as ‘the theologians of crisis’.

Ontologically, is God immanent *in* all humanity? Immanent in all creation? Or did the *krisis* theologians get it right when they said that revelation is always transcendent because God is always transcendent? Grammatically, how should we formulate our understanding into a doctrine? For example, what tense should we use to talk about revelation? What does it mean to say that ‘God has spoken’? And how should we order our predicative statements? Can we say that Jesus is God? Or that God is Jesus? Or that God is in Jesus? Can we do theology without supernatural revelation? Is the philosophical inquiry the same as the theological one? Or if we do need revelation before beginning the theological enterprise, with which moment of revelation should we begin? *Then*, in creation? *Then*, specifically in Christ? Or *now*, in the present existential moment of revelation-for-us? This quick list does not begin to exhaust the questions about revelation with which the tradition has grappled.

4. Religion (Natural and Revealed)

Two years after the publication of his doctoral thesis, Frei was commissioned to contribute a short essay to a textbook compilation, *A Handbook of Christian Theology*. This was a pocket-sized, semi-popularist publication with the ambitious subtitle, *Essential Information for Every Christian*.⁵¹ Small though the format is, this volume crams into its dense print over one hundred essays by an impressive cross-section of the day’s leading theologians: names that are instantly recognisable even now include Jaroslav Pelikan on “Dogma” and “Dogmatics”⁵²; Reinhold Niebuhr on “Freedom”, “The Self”, and “Sin”⁵³; Paul Tillich on “Kairos”⁵⁴; and a young George Lindbeck on “Thomism”⁵⁵. True to its stated intention, this book encompasses an array of hot theological topics, some of which have stood the test of time better than others. While deliberately Protestant in bias⁵⁶, there is no obvious theological

⁵¹ Marvin Halverson & Arthur Cohen, eds., *A Handbook of Christian Theology: Essential Information for Every Christian*, (London & Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1958).

⁵² *Ibid.* 85–90.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 143–5, 345–8, 350–3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 197–200.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 364–6.

⁵⁶ See Halverson & Cohen, eds., *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, 5: “It is intended ... to be “... a sourcebook to the understanding of Protestant thinking.” ”

agenda, and contributors, while doubtless chosen for their expertise, seem to have been given considerable freedom of approach as they variously grapple with issues of ethics, ecclesiology, church history, and doctrine.

The promising young theologian, Hans Frei, was allocated the unenviable task of summarising, in around 3500 words, the Christian understanding of revelation. The end product appears in the volume under the heading, “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”.⁵⁷ It is not known whether the actual title was given to him in advance, or whether he chose it for himself, or whether it was a later editorial decision. However, it seems fair to assume that it was not entirely of Frei’s own choosing, for a quick read of this short essay is enough to confirm that what we have here is a remarkable exercise in the thorough-going negation of a title.

To begin with, the essay offers absolutely no account of a theology of natural religion; no discussion of its history, main tenets, or principal proponents. Frei begins with the assumption, on which he claims there is broad, even universal agreement in contemporary theology, that the Christian faith is founded upon the divine revelation in history, and specifically upon the historical event that was Jesus Christ. He points out that, for nineteenth and twentieth century theologians alike, there is no such thing as “natural religion” or “religion in general”: for “religion, without a specific historic content, was merely an empty form”.⁵⁸ Christian theology had in some way to deal with the historic specificity of Jesus Christ, and there could be no account of the knowledge of God on any other grounds.

Thus, swiftly, Frei disposes of natural religion: perhaps his essay would have been better entitled, “Religion (Revealed)”. But in doing so, he outlines the broad principles of agreement between nineteenth century ‘liberal’ theology, and the dialectical theology of the mid-twentieth century ‘postliberal’ scene. For all that these twentieth century theologians had rebelled most comprehensively against the

⁵⁷ Hans W. Frei, “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, in *A Handbook of Christian Theology: Essential Information for Every Christian*, edited by Marvin Halverson & Arthur Cohen (London & Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1958), 313–23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 316.

previous century's dominant approach, there was one nineteenth century emphasis that they had not overturned: that the historical Jesus-event was the single most fundamental moment of divine revelation in history. On this point the two centuries were in full agreement. The voices of dispute were raised only when it came to explaining how that historically-past event has significance for us in our historical present. However, even on this topic the two camps are not as opposed as many of the latter theologians believed. Frei points out the broad consensus between the centuries, that "despite its indissoluble ties to a specific past event, revelation must come to present recipients as a present event".⁵⁹ Neither the fiercely-combative twentieth century 'dialectical' theologians nor the urbane nineteenth century liberals would have disputed this point.

Frei's useful survey of historical theology here describes for us how Schleiermacher and the nineteenth century liberals had their own accounts of the essential compatibility between God's speaking and our ability to hear, whether that compatibility is attributable to an inbuilt 'God-consciousness' or to some other God-given human faculty. However, for the twentieth century dialectical theologians, emphasising as they did the infinite distance between God and creation, this relation was a far more fraught issue, and one which had effectively divided the postliberal movement into two distinct and often opposing schools.

As stated above, *Der Römerbrief* marks almost the precise moment when the twentieth century rejected the liberal 'immanent' understanding of revelation, and turned instead to a 'dialectical' doctrine of an utterly transcendent, wholly objective God. Moreover, in the fierce dialectical schema of *Der Römerbrief*, far from being harmonious with human experience, the revelatory acts of God are received rather as almost violent incursions into the natural world order. With this 1922 publication, the Protestant theological world was at a word divided into 'old-school' liberals and the dynamic young *krisis* theologians. However, thereafter, things were not so

59 Frei, "Religion (Natural and Revealed)", 313.

binary. Barth continued on his own particular ‘actualist’⁶⁰ path, and then later supposedly ‘softened’ the ferocity of his dialectical method and polemic by incorporating a great appreciation of analogy.⁶¹ However, in the intervening years since the publication of *Der Römerbrief*, an unforeseen (by Barth) development was the emergence of a school of theology which, like Barth, was uncompromisingly dialectical, and yet in other respects, very ‘unBarthian’ indeed. Christian existentialism⁶² had scarcely been noticed by the English-speaking theological world before 1940; since then, however, it had very quickly gained ground, until by the time Frei came to publish his thesis, it was the single most dominant movement in academic theology. Moreover, Frei’s own doctoral supervisor and mentor at Yale, H. Richard Niebuhr, is broadly categorised in this essay as an existentialist theologian⁶³, and was perhaps even the first to impact powerfully on the American theological scene. His influence on Frei was powerful, and not easy for the young theologian to escape.

Frei’s little essay neatly illustrates that in 1958, he is as yet uncommitted to any particular school of theology. Perhaps he is merely seeking to give a balanced account of religion (natural and revealed), but it is clear that he has not yet aligned himself wholly with his contemporary dialectical theologians, whether of the Barthian or of the existentialist variety. Moreover, he shows an unfashionable appreciation of the nineteenth century liberals and refuses to dismiss them out-of-hand. If anything, one might conclude that Frei is intent on appreciating whatever is of value from any of these theological schools: a generous approach to theology which was to be a hallmark of his later career.

⁶⁰ Barth’s ‘actualism’ is defined by George Hunsinger as follows: “The possibility for the human creature to act faithfully in relation to the divine creator is thought to rest entirely on the divine act, and therefore continually befalls the human creature as a miracle to be sought ever new.” George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of his Theology*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4.

⁶¹ Barth’s ‘turn to analogy’ was the thesis of von Balthasar, and was almost unquestioningly accepted up until Bruce McCormack’s masterly rethinking in *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (of which more discussion later). Certainly, it was largely accepted by Frei.

⁶² Frei specifically references an “existential” understanding of revelation in this essay. See “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, 318.

⁶³ Frei, “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, 318.

Moreover, at this early stage in his career, Frei was still very much working under the mentorship of Niebuhr, whose influence is obvious in this essay. True, he had made the break with his mentor a year earlier, when he had contributed two essays to a volume on Niebuhr's theology⁶⁴, which essays are as critical as they are appreciative. However, in "Religion (Natural and Revealed)", the 'existentialist' influence still seems to be winning over a more actualistic account of revelation. This is evident in Frei's concern, not so much with the transcendent aspect of the divine speech-act (although, to be fair, that may be a 'given' for him, an almost "unconscious presupposition"). Rather, his concern is with how this speech-act impacts upon its human listeners. After all, as he points out, revelation is scarcely revelation unless it has "a content that may become intelligibly significant for its human recipients".⁶⁵

This concise, one-line summary raises what seems almost a truism: that the divine self-disclosure, in whatever shape or form it comes to us, must have a *content*; and that *content* must be *intelligible* and *significant*. Of course, any intelligible speech-act must say something: but this is not quite Frei's point here. In theological terms, revelation is the self-disclosure of God. Now, the content of *self*-disclosure is of course the Self; and so the content of divine self-disclosure must be the divine Self, actually and truly revealed. When God speaks, it is the content of God's own Self that is being described to us. Any account of revelation, then, is an attempt to grapple with the fundamental epistemological question, *What can we say about God?* If natural religion is outlawed from the start, then the only source of our knowledge is God's self-revelation. This was axiomatic for dialectical theologians of whatever brand, working as they all were in the aftermath of *Der Römerbrief*. This emphasis was an understandable reaction to liberal theology's preoccupation with human receptivity and its immanent account of revelation. However, the danger of the dialectical scheme is that it posited so strongly the speaking of God, that it struggled to give an account of how that revelation ever became "intelligibly significant" to the

⁶⁴ Hans W. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background", in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, edited by Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 9–64.

Hans W. Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, edited by Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 65–116.

⁶⁵ Frei, "Religion (Natural and Revealed)", 313.

human hearer. Hence Frei criticises what he sees as a certain abstraction at the heart of Barth's dialectic: if God's revelation is not "intelligible", then it has no content, and so barely qualifies as 'revelation' at all.

Frei's proposal in this essay is that the existentialist version of dialectical theology might have a credible answer to this puzzle of revelation. He describes how, for Niebuhr and his fellow existentialist theologians, "Revelation is *the* 'I-Thou encounter' *par excellence*" in which "the ultimate structure with which the self is here in contact is personal. Religion is a Subject-subject encounter". This is a clear attempt to speak about the transcendence of the revelatory moment in terms of its impact on the human subject: while not ceasing to be transcendent, nevertheless revelation by this account occurs on a level which we can at least conceptualise. However, even-handedly, Frei then contrasts this approach to the problem of revelation to Barth's own epistemological solution. As he explains, while Barth "rejects the direct attribution of a 'personal' dimension to God, asserted by the existentialist theologians", he finds his own way forward in a heavy reliance "on a concept of analogy, i.e., correspondence within dissimilarity".⁶⁶ This concept of analogy in Barth had been a key topic in Frei's doctoral dissertation, and one towards which he was favourably disposed: as Frei understands it, a divinely-authorized analogy allows *accurate enough* speech about God while yet preserving the dialectical unlikeness of God and creation. Nevertheless, Frei remains critical in this essay of what he sees as Barth's tendency towards Idealistic abstraction, and wonders whether Niebuhr's understanding of "two types of history", as outlined in *The Meaning of Revelation*⁶⁷, might not provide a "middle road" for theologians between "unrevelational history and unhistorical revelation ... be they called secular and sacred or objective and existential".⁶⁸

For the moment it seems that Frei is not yet ready to make a judgement between the various understandings of the doctrine of revelation that were on offer: he leaves the

⁶⁶ Frei, "Religion (Natural and Revealed)", 318.

⁶⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2001).

⁶⁸ Frei, "Religion (Natural and Revealed)", 318.

point unresolved in this essay, though he later rejects Niebuhr's conciliatory option of "two types of history". However, Frei's insight here, that revelation must have an intelligible content if it is to be more than merely a thunder booming across the dialectical void, is an early invocation of the hermeneutical question that was to occupy him for the rest of his career. As stated above, a God who reveals, reveals knowledge of God's own content: so if revelation has occurred at all, then we must be able to say something concrete about God. Add to that the theological consensus of the nineteenth and twentieth century, that Jesus Christ is the single most fundamental moment of divine revelation in history. In that case, the ultimate epistemological question, *What can we say about God?*, is answered by pointing to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ; and so the epistemological question transfers across to, *What can we say about Jesus?* However, Jesus is not directly available to us in his historical specificity, and so we are dependent for our knowledge of him almost entirely on the gospel accounts. Accordingly, the epistemological lens must pull back yet further, so that the question, *What can we say about God?*, finally transforms into, *How should we read the gospels?*

In framing the epistemological question thus as a hermeneutical one, Frei is taking a step in behind of the dominant dialectical theology, and might even be seen as aligning himself with the unfashionable nineteenth century liberal tradition. This is because hermeneutics seems to occupy a position very much at the human end of the dialectic, given that it is concerned with our understanding, and even our receptivity. Thus a focus on hermeneutics threatens to make God's revelation dependent on our *reading* of God; and moreover, seems to promise an access to the knowledge of God that is generally available to anyone who picks up a Bible, and works out how to read it. After all, the arch-liberal Schleiermacher "is regularly identified as the founder of modern hermeneutics".⁶⁹ The attraction of hermeneutics for Schleiermacher was that it promised a 'scientific'⁷⁰ methodology (that is, one which is generally applicable) for the decoding of any personal communication, so that all hearers or readers of

⁶⁹ James M. Brandt, *All Things New: Reform of Church and Society in Schleiermacher's Christian Ethics*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 32.

⁷⁰ Brandt suggests that "In his [Schleiermacher's] teaching career he accomplished what he had set out as a goal in his first lecture course at Halle – to raise hermeneutics to the level of a genuine science". (Ibid.) See also Martin Redeker, *Schleiermacher: Life and Thought*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 48.

such a self-revelation might have a semi-direct access to the mind of the ‘revealer’. Theologically, this meant that God, as ‘author’ of the entire universe, has revealed therein and so must in some way be generally available to all human ‘readers’ of God’s artistic handiwork. Hence the knowledge of God needs no special revelation. Even Jesus Christ is of dubious revelatory status, significant not in himself, but only when conjoined with the general awareness of God in our consciousness. Hence Schleiermacher locates revelation as the moment “when the historical event and the special religious awareness (or the direct presence of God) are fully united at some point in human experience”.⁷¹ The offensiveness of this position to the dialectical theologians need not be spelled out again; and it is an offensiveness which is closely aligned with a hermeneutical approach to revelation.

Now, Frei is far from adopting this position. He is well aware of the limitations of the nineteenth century approach, observing ruefully that “nineteenth-century theologians were never able to agree about *the point* at which objective event and concrete subjectivity (or living faith) became one”.⁷² Furthermore, Frei is generally accepting of the kind of Barthian actualism which insists that divine revelation is not dependent on any human receptivity. This insistence is designed to resist the suggestion that revelation, once received, can ever become a human possession – a *religion* – as Schleiermacher understood it. In aligning himself thus with his dialectical contemporaries, Frei has indeed most thoroughly negated his own title, so that even the abbreviated suggestion, “Religion (Revealed)”, would now be wholly inappropriate. Yet Schleiermacher’s reframing of the epistemological question (*How do we know God?*) as a hermeneutical one (*By what method might we read correctly God’s revelation?*) is much closer to Frei’s approach than the radical divorce and distance proposed by dialectic theology.

⁷¹ Frei, “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, 316.

⁷² Ibid. By “concrete subjectivity”, Frei here means that for Schleiermacher, although the experience of God in the consciousness of the believer is not ‘factual’ as such, in that it cannot be analysed by an objective process, neither is it purely subjective. The “concrete subjectivity” of the God-consciousness is immune to scientific method, but nevertheless has its own particular kind of reality and is amenable to rational examination.

5. The start of a project: Frei on Revelation and Grammatical Logic

Even in the midst of this broad sketch of theological history and principles, Frei is setting out his own particular stall. Revelation is all very well. But Frei's concise, even rather obvious summary, that revelation must in some way embody "a content that may become intelligibly significant for its human recipients", externalises a number of sometimes hidden assumptions surrounding the doctrine of revelation. To begin with, divine revelation can have meaning only insofar as it is first of all 'hearable' (let alone 'heard') by its "human recipients". Secondly, the divine speech-act, if it is to be understood as God's *self*-revelation, and not simply the expression of some truth about the universe which might have been epistemologically accessible by some more ordinary means, then it must be genuinely communicative of an ontological reality that is the "content" of God's self-referring words. Thirdly, and most crucially for Frei's abiding project, this communicated content, if it is to be genuine knowledge, must be "intelligible", that is, able to be formulated by us humans in recognisably grammatical terms.

In other words, already in this early essay, Frei is beginning to tease out the interweaving epistemological, ontological and grammatical implications of that most foundational doctrine of revelation. Revelation is all very well, but as he is working out, it is not so foundational an assumption as all that. Certainly, there is a formal logic to its adoption as a first principle: if we assume an absolute dialectical distance between world and God, *of course* we could say nothing about God, had God not crossed that distance and revealed in this world. But nevertheless, we already have drawn up criteria for what qualifies as revelation. God may speak in freedom, when and how God chooses. But if God's speech is to qualify as 'revelation', then as Schleiermacher's hermeneutics point out, it is bound by some of the rules of conversation. We have to be able to hear the speaker. We have to believe and experience the speaker in some sense to be 'real'. And we should be able to repeat back to the speaker the significant content of what they have said, but this time in our own words. But the issue for Frei, as for Barth and the twentieth century *krisis* theologians, is that all these 'conditions' for revelation can be no human conditions imposed on the divine. The dialectic does not work in that direction: that would be the wrong grammatical order. Rather, they must be considered as conditions

established by the divine itself, precisely in and with the moment of revelation. In other words, if Jesus is the supreme self-revelation of God, then we expect Jesus intelligibly to reveal the content of God, precisely because God, in Jesus, has created that expectation by fulfilling it in one and the same act. The formal logic of ‘revelation first, theology second’, segues into christological simultaneity. Jesus, the Word, is the foundational rational content of all the various understandings of the doctrine of revelation. Or to put it another way, the doctrine of revelation, in whatever form it appears, is not so much a prolegomena, as already an interpretation.

Towards the end of Frei’s life, this early insight becomes crystallised in the posthumously published and unfinished *Types of Christian Theology*. Here, Frei distinguishes between “first-order theology”, which is the faith-confessions of the Christian community, and “second-order theology”, which is the doctrinal statement of these faith-confessions. He writes, “there is what we have just called the logic, or grammar, of the faith, which may well have bearing on the first-order statements, an endeavour to bring out the rules implicit in first-order statements.”⁷³ However, and importantly, this is not a one-way street: the task of doctrinal formulation is not only to express the faith, but in discovering the difficulties of expression, may also help to shape the faith. The creeds of the church, for example, which are certainly “confession(s) of specific beliefs” recited in worship and utilised in theology as broad hermeneutical guidelines, are themselves doctrinal statements whose grammatical logic has been most carefully worked out.

The problem is that there is frequently a mismatch between grammatical logic and the ontological actuality it seeks to describe. Some events happen simultaneously; some beings or natures co-exist in absolute unity; some seeming predicates, such as ‘exists’, turn out not to be predicates at all.⁷⁴ In such and similar circumstances, given that it is impossible to speak of two things at once, the speaker must make a choice of grammatical ordering if they are to be at all intelligible – even if this is a

⁷³ Frei, *Types*, 20–1.

⁷⁴ This is the famous argument of Kant, that “Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations in themselves.” Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 567.

distortion of the actuality. This is the eternal problem faced when theologising about the Trinity, for example: the grammatical necessity of speaking separately about the three does not correspond to any ontological separation. Nevertheless, the choice made as to the logical ordering of the Father, Son, and Spirit, is no random ordering, but a prioritising of sorts. Arius' heresy was of course to load this grammatical ordering with too much ontological weight, and interpret it as designating a chronological and hierarchical priority.⁷⁵ However, that is not to say that the grammatical ordering carries no ontological weight at all: even the orthodox Athanasian treatment prioritises the 'Father' as the source of the being of the 'Son' and 'Spirit', so that the grammatical ordering corresponds to some kind of ontological priority, though not (as with Arius) a chronological or hierarchical one. If the order were to be posited grammatically as Spirit, Father, and Son, for example, the inevitable result would be some quite different theological conclusions. However, the subtlety of the Trinitarian grammar is that, in and with this sense of priority, is also given an insistence upon the simultaneity of at least two of the persons, Father and Son. Given that a father cannot be a father without an offspring, the grammatical logic of the one contains the necessity of the other, while also preserving a vital order, so that it is almost impossible to speak of Son first, and then Father.

This example of Trinitarian grammar illustrates nicely two almost opposite contentions. Firstly, it illustrates that grammatical ordering is no random choice, but does carry with it some ontological weight. Grammatical order is shaped by ontological order, and accordingly, ought to correspond to revealed truths. Secondly, however, the example of Trinitarian grammar demonstrates that grammatical order is *not the same as ontological order*. There is a vital dialectical separation between the two, in line with the dialectical separation between God and world. If the grammatical logic corresponds to the ontological actuality in any way, this is through grace alone, and such a correspondence is better thought of as analogical rather than

⁷⁵ Arius's famous dictum, "There was when he was not", illustrates precisely this chronological gap between the Father and the Son, so that in his scheme, the Son is not co-eternal. It follows then, that if the Son is not co-eternal, then he is not God in any sense, and must therefore be a creature. Quite clearly, then, the Son is hierarchically 'lower' than the Father. For a full account of the Arian controversy, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987).

as univocal.⁷⁶ As the example of the Trinity demonstrates, a failure to distinguish between grammatical logic and ontological actuality can lead to a whole host of theological misunderstandings, not to mention heresies.

The same problem of logical ordering emerges in relation to the doctrine of revelation. Revelation and God: which to speak of *first*? In recent years, this question has been at the heart of much theological controversy in the Barthian traditions, as two principal and opposing camps consider whether God's being is eternally Trinitarian *before* God's decision to reveal (in an actual, though not a temporal sense), or eternally Trinitarian precisely *in* God's decision to reveal. This debate was kick-started by Eberhard Jüngel, who in 1966 published the short monograph, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden*, later translated into English as *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming*.⁷⁷ With the aim of avoiding metaphysical speculation, Jüngel tackles the 'content' of God from the angle of that most metaphysical of doctrines, the Trinity. His objective was to extrapolate from Barth a more focussed Trinitarian ontology, in which God's being is "ontologically localized"⁷⁸ in the dynamic act of 'becoming':

God's being is *in motion* from eternity. God's being is moved being: 'Being is the act of his revelation.' (CDII/2, 257.) At the same time, however, God's primal decision teaches us to understand God's *being concretely* ...⁷⁹

Jüngel, then, around the same time as Frei is producing his mature theology, is likewise concerned to locate a concrete account of the content of God. Since then, the topic he inaugurated has mushroomed into an abstruse and hugely complicated debate, as the current generation of Barthian scholars finds itself considering whether there an ontological distinction to be made between a 'pre-existent' Son, the *Logos asarkos*, who elected to enter our history, and the historical person Jesus Christ the *Logos ensarkos*.⁸⁰ While in epistemological terms, our knowledge of the Son begins

⁷⁶ There will be further discussion of the concept of analogy as used and understood by Frei towards the end of the thesis, in Chapter 5.

⁷⁷ Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden*, (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1966). English translation: *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming*, (Edinburgh & London: Scottish Academic Press), 1976.

⁷⁸ Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, vi.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 3.

⁸⁰ Among the many articles written on this topic, perhaps the two clearest statements of the opposing positions have been made by George Hunsinger and Bruce McCormack. See George Hunsinger,

with the historical Jesus of Nazareth, we are nevertheless *grammatically* obliged to speak of the pre-existent Son first. The question becomes whether this necessary grammatical logic bears any direct relation to the order of being.

Some of the details of this debate will be considered later, as it is one to which Frei has a significant contribution to make. For this is Frei's crucial insight: that there are different kinds of logic at work in the theo-logical task. Ontological logic is one, but the epistemological logic is another, and grammatical logic yet a third. Sometimes these different logics will overlap considerably, or run parallel to one another, to the point where they are frequently confused. The result is a theological muddle where the logical thread is so tangled that the reader is hard pressed to locate the cut end. Frei's self-imposed and lifelong task, whose genesis is seen here in his thesis and in this early essay on "Religion (Natural and Revealed)", is to locate the *actual* starting point for any given theology, and from there to unravel the tangles and lay out the grammatical order of belief in its most linear form. Only then can we bypass the usual assumption of revelation (in whatever form) as the starting point, and see clearly not only where any given theological system⁸¹ really begins, but also where it ends. For only once we have reached the end point – the content of God – are we in a position to make a judgement as to the success and value of the system.

This brief introductory summary can scarcely do justice to the complexity of the theological scene through which Frei is just beginning to steer his course, let alone give more than a hint of Frei's abiding relevance. The essay considered above is short, its claims are sweeping, and its theological position is as yet hesitant: this introduction likewise. But it sets out neatly the positions of Frei's three principal academic 'fathers' – Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, and H. Richard Niebuhr – who together dominate the theological inheritance with which Frei must grapple if he is to arrive at a synthesis of critical appreciation and independent conclusion. And even more importantly, the essay points to the interrelation of hermeneutics and of

"Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth", *Modern Theology* 24:2 (2008), 179–98; and Bruce McCormack, "Election and the Trinity: Theses in response to George Hunsinger", in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, (2010), 203–24.

⁸¹ The term 'system' is used here in its lightest sense, to encompass any logical ordering of theology and/or doctrine.

epistemology, always at the base of every theological endeavour, and so symptomatic of Frei's endless probing *beneath*, for the assumptions, the foundations, the frameworks which underpin and give rise to every theological stance.

6. Outline of Work

This thesis offers a systematic engagement with the theological hermeneutics of Hans Frei. The short and early essay described above provides the two key conceptual categories which will shape the exploration of Frei's theological project: that of the content of God, and Frei's search for a means of talking about it. Moreover, the content he seeks, if it is to deserve the label of 'content' at all, must be a concrete content: typically, all metaphysical speculation is disallowed.

Intertwined with these traditional 'ontological' and 'epistemological' categories will be the discussion of the abiding issue of logic in its ontological, epistemological, grammatical, and formal senses, as Frei sets himself the task not only of untangling the confused logic of some of his theological opponents, but of establishing his own clear order of belief. The thesis demonstrates that for Frei, the logical starting point for the order of belief is the identity of Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture. It is on that basis alone that a positive and concrete content of God can be posited. This aspect of 'untangling' ontology and grammatical logic in particular is central to the project of the thesis, and to Frei's continued relevance.

In doing this, the intention is to set Frei very firmly within his mid-twentieth century context, in particular his engagement with, appreciation of, but ultimate rejection of contemporary existentialist theology. Indeed, given that much of his own project was formulated in direct opposition to the key existentialist theologians of his time, there will be frequent engagement with their arguments, in the belief that these will throw Frei's own position into greater relief. Against this mid-twentieth century theological context, the shape and urgency of Frei's task will become clear.

The thesis does not stop at the mid-twentieth century, however, and will illustrate the continued relevance of Frei's hermeneutical theology with reference to how existentialist modes of thought survive into this century. In the process, it will also become clear how Frei continues to be appropriated and misappropriated in contemporary debates, whether these be in the fields of biblical studies or of systematic theology. Moreover, suggestions will be made as to his applicability to modern theological concerns, including the debate surrounding the being and action of God: a field where he has yet to be deployed successfully. Once again, this applicability will centre around Frei's clear-sighted distinction between ontological and grammatical logic alongside their essential relation.

The thesis concentrates on Frei's theological development from his first works through to the twin publications of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974) and *The Identity of Jesus Christ*⁸² (1975). These latter two works I take to be central to Frei's theological hermeneutics, and I follow Mike Higton in my tendency to read his later work as "a clarification of the kind of academic theology that will best be able to assist the Christian practice of figural reading, and so best able to acknowledge the providential ordering of history in Jesus Christ which that practice confesses".⁸³ In particular, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* will be read for its account of the resurrection as key to the positing of a concrete content to the identity of God.

The material is arranged into five chapters. The first of these considers in detail the three principle alternative accounts of the doctrine of revelation which were available to Frei at the start of his career: those of Schleiermacher, Barth, and H. Richard Niebuhr. From these accounts Frei acquired many questions and some answers, but wholeheartedly embraced none of them, not even Barth's. In our own consideration, we will be considering exactly what it was that Frei judged as deficient in each approach, in respect particularly of their ability to present an account of God which had some actual concrete content. His own way forward will then become clearer.

⁸² Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997).

⁸³ Higton, *Christ, Providence and History*, 14–15.

The second chapter focuses in on one particular essay: Frei's Preface to the 1975 publication of *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. The value of this Preface is that it sets out concisely and with some clarity exactly why Frei chose to approach his theological task in precisely this hermeneutical fashion. Here the topic of logic in its various guises becomes vital, which, taken together, make up what Frei terms "the order" or "the logic of belief".⁸⁴ Topics include Frei's understanding of prolegomena and methodology, his opposition to existentialist theology in the shape of Neo-Orthodoxy, his refusal of apologetics as a 'poor substitute' for realist theology, and his rejection of the concept of the hermeneutical circle in favour of a 'linear' and 'cumulative' realistic narrative hermeneutic. This latter point is central to Frei's conceptualisation of theological grammar.

Chapter 3 takes that linear and cumulative model for understanding Frei's hermeneutics, and engages it specifically with his reading of scripture, as set out in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei's concept of a 'realistic narrative' hermeneutic, introduced in Chapter 2, is here fleshed out with an account of what that looks like in application. The figurative reading of scripture is shown to be vital to the maintenance of its unity, which turns out to be a necessary precondition for the doctrine of revelation, if God is not to be separated from God's Word. The chapter then proceeds to a consideration of another, related kind of unity: that of the unified self. At this point the chapter moves into a preliminary discussion of Frei's concept of personal identity as outlined in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. Logically, a being who is both fully divine and fully human, is inconceivable. However, Frei illustrates how such seeming contradictions are held together with ease through the medium of a linear and cumulative realistic narrative.

The fourth chapter deals with the climax of Frei's theological system, which is his account of the resurrection as key to the identity of Jesus Christ. Frei's Anselmic formulation, that Jesus is the one who cannot be thought of as not living, is examined for coherence. Consideration is then given to two alternative approaches to the resurrection: one by N. T. Wright as an example of a historical reading, and the other

⁸⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 58.

by Paul Tillich as an existentialist account which is still highly relevant today. In doing so, the advantages of Frei's 'literary' approach become more apparent, as does the reasoning behind his theological choices. Finally, we return to the doctrine of revelation to see if we do now indeed have an account of the concrete content of God according to Frei's realistic narrative exegesis of the resurrection.

Lastly, the fifth chapter focuses on the presence of Jesus Christ: how this is inseparably rooted in the gospel account of the resurrection, and how this works in terms of grammatical and ontological logic. The chapter begins with a consideration of the grammatical and ontological implications of Frei's 'Anselmic proof', in which he defines Jesus Christ as 'he who cannot be thought of as not living'. Bultmann's alternative account of the 'livingness' and presence of Jesus Christ is held up for comparison. A section is devoted to Frei's understanding of the role played by analogy in theological talk, and how this too is grounded in the biblical account of the resurrection. Then finally, the role of the Holy Spirit is also considered, as is the eschatological dimension of Frei's theology.

The aim of the whole is to present the coherence and interconnectedness of the various aspects of Frei's theological hermeneutics, which taken together constitute what I have termed his 'theological grammar'. The intention is to set out clearly his conception of the logic of belief and its relation to the content of God, which is the both the starting point and the end of all our theologising. In doing so, it is hoped also to demonstrate the continued value to today's debates, of Frei's clear-sighted analysis of the relation between ontology and grammatical logic.

Chapter 1 The Content of God

1. The Doctrine of Revelation: The Available Options

The aim of this chapter is to begin to examine the questions surrounding any given doctrine of revelation, as suggested at the start of the Introduction. If Frei's instinct always is to probe beneath, to the hidden assumptions underpinning a doctrine, then there is a need to illustrate how this probing looks in practice. Accordingly, an examination will be made of the three principal accounts of revelation which were available and potentially congenial to Frei at the start of his theological career: that of Friedrich Schleiermacher, to represent the 19th century liberal option; that of Karl Barth, the topic of Frei's doctoral thesis; and that of H. Richard Niebuhr, Frei's own *Doktoratsvater* and representative of the mid-20th century 'existentialist' option.¹

Albeit at different times in his career, Frei did each of these theologians the honour of a supremely careful and clear-sighted reading, untangling their assumptions one from the other, and laying bare their theological processes. In the course of examining Frei's accounts of his theological predecessors, and despite his level-headed appreciation of the strengths of each, it will become clear that of the three, his life-long preference is for Barth's approach. Already, however, a conclusion can be drawn: if Frei did not wholeheartedly embrace any one of their theologies, then he must have perceived something deficient in the *actual* starting point which he found to be underlying their *assumed* starting point in a doctrine of revelation. In each instance, Barth included, Frei deduces that where the assumed starting point is concrete enough, the actual starting point is in fact an abstraction.

Furthermore, this chapter will demonstrate that the problem lies, not in any particular framing of the doctrine of revelation, but in the adoption of *any* version of this doctrine as a starting point for theology. To remind ourselves: Frei is searching for a

¹ 'Existentialism' as a theological movement is defined and described in detail in the section in this chapter which deals with H. Richard Niebuhr.

way of ordering theology which will lead to a concrete account of the content of God. Or rather, such a concrete account is not so much the end point as itself the starting point for theology, for an abstract starting point will not at some future date arrive at a concrete end, and vice versa. On the contrary: a theological ‘system’ is *either* concrete *or* abstract, all the way through. The question of the logic of belief – what the actual epistemological starting point should be, and in what order the content of God should be expressed – will be addressed more specifically in Chapter 2. However, the *failures* in grammatical order which Frei perceives in these three alternative accounts of the being and knowledge of God will be examined here, in the course of which the direction of Frei’s own theological project will become clearer.

When considering the three major schemes available to Frei, it may seem a little perverse to begin with Barth. Chronologically, of course Schleiermacher has to take precedence, and it is hard to appreciate the twentieth century dialectical theologians without some understanding of what they were reacting against. Accordingly, the decision to begin with Barth necessitates some initial brief description of the liberal tradition, which might have found its place in a previous account of Schleiermacher’s doctrine of revelation.

However, the chosen order is appropriate given that the focus here is on *Frei’s* theological development. Barth’s doctrine of revelation was the topic of his first major theological work, and marks the beginning of his life-long, though not uncritical, appreciation of Barth’s work. Immediately afterwards, he began to engage directly in print with Niebuhr’s theology, producing in 1957 the two lengthy essays for *Faith and Ethics*, which subject Niebuhr to a thoroughly critical examination. The following year saw the brief consideration of Niebuhr in “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”. Thereafter, however, with the exception of a late, appreciative paper on his public theology², Frei scarcely ever returns to Niebuhr: his

2 Hans W. Frei, “H. Richard Niebuhr on History, Church, and Nation”, in *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, edited by Ronald F. Thiemann, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 1–23.

See also *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 213–33.

own theological project is no longer beholden to his *Doktoratsvater*, and his major works neither make mention of him nor betray much by way of his influence.

It may well be that at this early stage, Frei accepted without much demur his older contemporaries' dismissal of Schleiermacher. However, as his career progressed, Frei came to a greater appreciation of Schleiermacher's profound theological skills – not least because of the three, it was Schleiermacher who was the most innovative hermeneutician. Frei devotes some attention to Schleiermacher in his two early essays on Niebuhr, but it is not until *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* that he accords him his first in-depth exploration. Indeed, the last two chapters of this wide-ranging study are devoted almost exclusively to Schleiermacher: that they are highly critical chapters need not detract from the fact that Frei was now taking Schleiermacher seriously as a dialogue partner. For the remainder of his career and up to his death in 1988, Frei continued to wrestle with Schleiermacher, and in the process to grow in appreciation of the once-despised nineteenth century liberal.

2. The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth

2.1 The Break with Liberalism

Therefore, as Barth was Frei's starting point, so he will also be ours. There is an added advantage in this choice, which is an appealing simplicity to the Barthian doctrine of revelation, uncluttered as it is by human subjectivity, and unfettered by the compulsion to establish first and foremost the epistemological questions of how and when and where God speaks. That God reveals Godself in speech-acts: that is for Barth the simplest and most foundational premise of all theology, and faith is not so much a human response to revelation, as an aspect of revelation in and of itself.

This essential, though profound, simplicity is therefore highly useful to our purposes. Of course, there is theological complexity – the sheer volume of Barth's doctrinal output is testament to that – but this complexity is nevertheless founded on the simple, two-word, ontological statement: *Deus dixit* – God has spoken. Although not

formulated as such at this stage, this is the underlying premise of *Der Römerbrief*³, which finally comes to full expression in 1932, in the first volume of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*.⁴

Barth, as Frei points out, began life as a card-carrying ‘liberal’, studying under Wilhelm Herrmann⁵:

In his liberal days Barth had been convinced that there is a direct connection between God’s historical self-manifestation in Jesus Christ and the inward, religious experience of the Christian individual.⁶

For all Herrmann’s profound differences to his predecessor, it is clear that both Frei and Barth understand him as belonging to a strand of theological thinking which has descended – by a sometimes tortuous route – from Schleiermacher. In other words, Herrmann was consciously working within a non-Idealistic, anti-Hegelian tradition, with a concept of God as profoundly personal. The ‘liberal’ doctrine of revelation as held by Schleiermacher was a complex thing, and its nuances will be explored

³ The phrase, *Deus dixit*, makes only one appearance in *Der Römerbrief*, actually in a citation by Luther. Luther’s point is a grammatical one: “‘Si Deus pro nobis, quis contra nos? – Were we competent to decline the pronoun nos – nobis and to fathom its meaning, we should be bound also to transform the noun Deus into a verb and conjugate it thus: Deus – dixit – dictum est.” (cited in Barth, *Romans*, 326.) The phrase reappears in *Church Dogmatics I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, (London & New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 113.

This final formulation corresponds nicely with the Trinitarian formulation of the Word of God which Barth outlines in CDI: Revealer – Revelation – Being Revealed. Here Barth continues the grammatical theme with the observation, “And now we are no longer following the schema of subject, predicate, object (revealer, revelation, revealing), which was only designed to show to what extent we are in fact led by revelation itself to the problem of trinity. Or rather, we now dissolve this scheme – which still has and retains its significance – in the manner suited to the concrete form of revelation on the one side and the doctrine of the Trinity on the other. The question of revealer, revelation, and being revealed corresponds to the logical and material order both of biblical revelation and also of the doctrine of the Trinity. We shall thus return to this order when the latter is developed. But we must now follow another order ...” (CDI/1, 314.)

⁴ Karl Barth, *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes. (I. Halbband): Prolegomena zur Kirchlichen Dogmatik* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1932). English Translation: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (London & New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

⁵ Herrmann had taught Barth the basic Protestant emphasis on the knowledge of God being attained through revelation alone: “God ... does not, for his own holiness’ sake, suffer men to reach him through any efforts of their own”. (Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, London: Williams & Norgate, 1906), 57. He also stresses justification by faith alone, just as Barth did from his early career through his ‘conversion’ to a more radical dialectical theology than Herrmann’s – see, for example, Barth, *Romans*, 110: “Faith is not a foundation upon which men can emplace themselves; not an atmosphere in which they can breathe; not a system under which they can arrange their lives ... The ‘Moment’ of the movement of men by God is beyond men, it cannot be enclosed in a system or a method or a ‘way’. It rests in the good pleasure of God, and its occasion is to be found only in him.”

⁶ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 1.

shortly. However, it is enough for our present purposes to note with Frei this general emphasis: that for Herrmann, as for Schleiermacher, there exists a “basic unity between Jesus Christ and present Christian faith or religion; between objective, historical, concrete divine presence and the subjective spontaneity of response”. Frei goes on to add that for the liberal tradition, “the normative element in Christian faith lies in this relation. It is at once revelation and religion”.⁷ Accordingly, Frei places the very early Barth firmly in this same tradition, as one who insists that God is “immediately present to the believing individual”⁸ – even though Barth’s unease with his tradition is traced by Frei right back to his first published essay.

This, then, was Barth’s conventionally liberal starting point. The interest for Frei in his doctoral thesis is the process by which Barth moved away from this sophisticated ‘immanent’ understanding of revelation to the ‘opposite’ doctrine of an utterly transcendent, wholly objective God. Frei sees Barth’s ‘conversion’ to *krisis* theology as beginning with a series of very practical questions which cut to the heart of the liberal doctrine of revelation. At the start of his doctoral thesis, he reports how Barth’s 1909 essay evinces a strong suspicion that “religious individualism and historical relativism”⁹ form a poor basis for the practical work of the pastor. It seems to Barth, that over the years since Schleiermacher had introduced the concept of universal God-consciousness, there had been a kind of slide in the liberal theological tradition, to the point where there is no longer any “universally valid *ordo salutis*, nor any universally valid source of revelation which one person could demonstrate to another”.¹⁰ If religion is to continue down this entirely individualistic line, then there will remain no external ontological reality, and no “normative concepts”, not even reason, to which modern theology can refer its language. Ultimately, the result would be to empty the concept of God of all content, to make void theology’s own discourse, and to reduce the preacher to silence.

⁷ Frei, “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, 316–17.

⁸ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.* 13.

¹⁰ Barth, “Moderne Theologie und Reichsgottesarbeit”, in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* (1909), 317–21, 319. Cited in Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 13.

Barth's first question, then, is primarily epistemological, concerning the tension between faith and reason – between which there should be little tension if God is indeed revealed and immanent. His second question, as identified by Frei, is more properly grammatical and doctrinal. If revelation does occur in the meeting of God's self-revelation and the receptiveness of the human mind, then how should the theologian or preacher actually describe this moment of intersection? Frei paraphrases Barth: "What is its recipient mode? Where, in the inner geography of the human soul does it actually occur?"¹¹

Barth, then, is asking about the *how* and the *where* of revelation. His third question, as identified by Frei, concerns the *what* and the *when*. This is a profoundly ontological question, concerned with the very being of God in revelation-in-history. Frei illustrates how this third line of questioning, implicit in Barth's 1909 essay (as the issue of ontology is implicit in all discussions of epistemology), now becomes thoroughly explicit in his second major theological outing¹² in 1912:

How can the absolute be ingredient in a totally relative event? How can the immediacy of a divine-human contact be realised in an intermediary 'agency', namely, history? Furthermore, how can a positive, purely factual event of the past which is quite external to the internal experience of an individual become the basis of his internal experience?¹³

Thus Frei encapsulates Barth's probing approach to the problem of revelation even before he broke with liberalism. However, despite these early questions, there was one liberal assumption which Barth did not question until much later: the reasonableness of revelation. In brief, revelation as immanent and available to all and in all is indistinguishable from general and inherent human reason. For the liberal theologians, this essential reasonableness was "beyond question and the indisputable starting point for all theologizing".¹⁴ This held true to such an extent that, if revelation could not be rendered "intelligibly significant" in suitably ordered and rational language, then the clear judgement was that there had in fact been no revelation.

¹¹ Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 32.

¹² Karl Barth, "Der Christliche Glaube und die Geschichte", in *Schweizerische Theologische Zeitschrift* (1912), 1–18, 49–72.

¹³ Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 33.

Barth's break with liberalism came when he finally focussed his questioning on this foundational assumption about revelation, which is grammatical at its core. Accordingly, what Barth set out to do in *Der Römerbrief* was to prove that theology could be done *without* a doctrine of immanent revelation; that in fact, the concept of immanent revelation had been a blind alley down which theology had wandered. Revelation, he was to claim in direct contradiction, had to be purely transcendent if it were to be called revelation at all. This was no mere variation on a liberal theme, but a complete and radical remaking of the very basis for our knowledge of and talk about God.

2.2 Revelation in *Der Römerbrief* and *Church Dogmatics 1*

So far we have considered how Frei reads Barth's early worries about the liberal tradition. Now, however, we jump to 'the end of the beginning', the writing and publication of *Der Römerbrief* in 1922.¹⁵ This was the work which was to put Barth firmly on the theological map, and which largely set the agenda for twentieth century Protestant theology, for good or for ill. It was controversial not merely in terms of its content but also in terms of its method, which was the diametric opposite of the smooth, interlocking systems of the liberal theologians.

What distinguished *Der Römerbrief* from the start was its insistence on the utter transcendence, not merely of God, but most particularly of God's revelation:

That God speaks ... is something strange, peculiar, new; ... This 'otherness' cuts sharply through all human sense of possession and semi-possession, even through all sense of not-possessing ... The voice of God which is His *power* (i.16) is and remains the voice OF GOD ... God is free.¹⁶

This utter transcendence of revelation meant the epistemological removal of God from consciousness or experience. God is now on the far side of the dialectical void, which can only be crossed by an act of sheer grace on God's part. This act of grace is what we call revelation, and is best characterised as God 'speaking'. Later, in

¹⁵ Barth himself dated his 'conversion' from liberalism to 1915: the period from 1916–1919 was occupied in writing the first edition of *Der Römerbrief*, which he later revised to excise its remaining 'liberal' tendencies. See McCormack, *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 123ff.

¹⁶ Barth, *Romans*, 92.

Church Dogmatics Volume I, this ‘speaking’ is characterised as *deus dixit*: God has spoken.¹⁷

Barth refuses to ‘clutter’ his starting point of *deus dixit* with anything like the epistemological baggage of Schleiermacher, or even of the Reformers. Indeed, in some senses, the *deus dixit* is the negation of epistemology: it is a pure act of God, and as such needs neither reason nor precondition. Even the traditional Reformed starting point of scripture is heavily qualified:

The Bible, then, is not in itself and as such God’s past revelation ... The Bible, speaking to us and heard by us as God’s Word, *bears witness* to past revelation.¹⁸

Hence scripture is indeed epistemologically useful, but only in a secondary sense: it might point us to God, but in itself had no power to reveal God. This was Barth’s attempt to remove even scripture from possessive human hands, and restore revelation to its transcendent origin.¹⁹

Frei was to spend many more years working out the implications of this rebellion against liberal epistemology – indeed, this virtual rejection of the category of epistemology altogether. Yet even at this early stage, he raises the question that, if God is so “*totaliter alter*, transcendent in the sense of being metaphysically and morally removed from the creature”²⁰, then on what basis can humans even begin to talk about him? At least in the liberal tradition a constructive theology was possible,

¹⁷ Later, Barth’s prolegomena takes up a far more christological focus. This change is identifiable from *Church Dogmatics II:2, The Election of God*, in which Jesus Christ is presented as both the object and subject of election. McCormack even suggests that, had it been possible to go back and rewrite the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth would have begun with the doctrine of election. It seems that Barth came to share Frei’s unease with the doctrine of revelation as a starting point for theology, although he certainly ‘solved’ this in a different direction. See Bruce L. McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology”, in Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 183–200.

¹⁸ Barth, *CDI/I*, 111. (my italics)

¹⁹ The English theologian, A. M. Fairweather, thoroughly disliked Barth for his rejection of natural theology; but another root of his dislike was that Barth also seemed to reject scripture as a locus of revelation. He complained, “Karl Barth will not allow that revelation can assume such a form, on the ultimate ground that human nature is too corrupt to retain any divine gift. It follows that we cannot know the divine Will through Scripture.” A. M. Fairweather, *The Word as Truth: A Critical Examination of the Christian Doctrine of Revelation in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, (London & Redhill: Lutterworth Press, 1944), v.

²⁰ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 112.

so that when I experience God in my consciousness of my utter dependence, then I can truly and even objectively talk about God on the basis of what I have experienced. Such a God has a content which is indeed intelligibly significant – or rather, the intelligible significance *is* the content. But is it really the case, as von Balthasar claimed, that *Der Römerbrief* constitutes “the ‘hell’ of religion”²¹ – that is, that it constitutes the impossibility of knowing God? If so, then Frei worries that that would be not so much ‘freedom’ on God’s part as utter silence, even non-existence, both for God and for us.

Of course, in one sense von Balthasar is absolutely right: Barth does posit the “hell” of all religion in that his starting point is ontological rather than epistemological. Eschewing a prolegomena such as Schleiermacher’s, Barth plunges into theology after in the manner of the book of Genesis: “Beginning ... God.” Ontologically, *God has spoken*. This transcendent actuality is the “primary reality of life”²², and the precondition for all grammatical and doctrinal talk about God. Epistemologically, we are therefore stymied, for neither experience nor the biblical witness constitute the predicate in *deus dixit*. Rather, the predicate, ‘has spoken’, refers to Jesus Christ alone:

The true theme of the biblical witness is the second of the concepts, God’s action in His revelation, revelation in answer to what God does, and therefore the predicate in our statement.²³

Moreover, the faith which enables us to receive Christ-as-revelation is not to be located in some inherent receptive capacity in all humanity, but is itself “a predicate of the Word of God”.²⁴ Accordingly, in terms of strict grammatical logic, we must posit revelation-without-precondition as *prior to* faith, as grammatically the subject is prior to the predicate, even though in actuality the bestowing of faith is entirely *simultaneous with* the act of revelation. Therefore, although Barth’s ‘prolegomena’ is the ontological statement, *Deus dixit*, this rightly should not be seen as a doctrine of revelation at all. To consider “God has spoken” as a *doctrine*, and the foundational one at that, would be to start at quite the wrong end of the logic of

²¹ Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 68.

²² Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 112.

²³ Barth, *CDI/I*, 314–15.

²⁴ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 117.

belief: that is, with our reception of that revelation and our ability to express this in grammatical terms, rather than with God in Godself. Indeed, it is this understanding of revelation as a ‘non-doctrine’ which lies at the root of Frei’s negation of his title in “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”.

The arrival at the being of God is therefore not the end-point of a logic which begins with the assumption of revelation. Rather, the being of God in itself is the precondition of all our knowing, and thus is the “starting point for the whole doctrine of revelation”.²⁵ In short, where liberal theology began with the mode of knowing God, and from that derived insight into the being of God, Barth begins with the being of God, and from that derives insight into the mode of our knowing. In other words, the correct logical and grammatical order is ontology first, then epistemology.

2.3 Frei’s Analysis of Barth

Frei’s worry, evident in his restless insistence in “Religion (Natural and Revealed)” that the concept of God must have a *content*, is that an account which begins with the simple being of God is to posit a very speculative starting point for theology. This holds even when the subject (the *deus*) is inextricably bound up with the predicate, (the *dixit*), for grammatically, the subject must be posited first, and hangs there as an abstraction until the predicate ‘fleshes it out’. Just as the Trinitarian order of expression left room for Arius to insert a wedge between Father and Son, so too Barth’s order of expression leaves room for other theologians to lever apart God and the historical Jesus of Nazareth. This question of the grammatical logic of belief later becomes an even more pressing worry for Frei, and will be considered in detail in the next chapter.

However, Frei is fully aware that Barth is far from espousing some abstract metaphysics. On the contrary, the God who confronts us, who says ‘No!’ to all our attempts to possess and understand, can be no mere metaphysical entity, but must be

²⁵ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 448.

real, in some way “concretely personal”.²⁶ Such an objective God cannot help but have a content, and if we have any sort of knowledge of God at all, then that can only have come about because of a divine act of revelation. This ‘relational objectivism’ has usefully been described by George Hunsinger:

By nature, as we have seen, God is hidden from us absolutely. There is no way from us to God. We are separated from God by an ontological divide. Yet, as we have also seen, God is not separated from us in precisely the same way. It belongs to the sovereign freedom of God that God can cross over the divide in an act of self-revelation. This self-revelation can only mean, however, that God takes form for us in terms of the creaturely sphere – the only kind of terms we can apprehend. By taking form in this apprehensible way, God becomes a genuine object of our knowledge; yet by doing so in terms of the creaturely sphere – the sphere of that which is not God – God becomes a unique object of knowledge and remains hidden in the midst of revelation.²⁷

This revelation may be necessarily indirect, but God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ was nevertheless a true revelation, giving us real and concrete knowledge of the content of God:

God’s being in relation to the human creature was no different from God’s being in relation to itself. God’s identity in history was essentially the same as God’s identity in eternity, for otherwise God would not have engaged in an act of self-revelation, that is, God’s essential identity would not have been disclosed.²⁸

If this is so, then as Hunsinger points out, a process of inference becomes possible, whereby God can be truly inferred from the modes in which God reveals Godself in our history. So from God’s free giving of Godself in revelation, we can infer some concrete content to God, that is, that God is eternally free and at the same time eternally self-giving. Ontologically, we can say that God is the God who reveals in Christ, and what God reveals in Christ is epistemologically rich and true, a concrete means to concrete knowledge of the concrete content of God. As one would expect from the logic of grammar, the predicate does indeed ‘flesh out’ the subject.

Yet, as Barth most ably illustrated, it remains the case that the epistemological task is fraught with all the problems of human hubris, presumptuousness and inadequacy. Moreover, for all that God’s revelation is true, the moment we creatures get our hands on it and try to encapsulate it in language and doctrine, we go horribly wrong in all sorts of directions. That is why according to the dialectical method, knowledge

²⁶ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 474.

²⁷ Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 76–7.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 36.

of God in revelation is snatched away the same moment it is given – for just imagine the damage we could do if God ever gave revelation over to our possession! Indeed, the damage that we can and did do to God’s revelatory Word is quite clearly illustrated by the narrative of the cross. Rather, the moment that we think we have grasped God’s revelation is the moment when God’s ‘No!’ resounds, and we are confounded once more. So what we have with Barth is revelation-but-not-revelation, revealed-but-hidden, simultaneously unveiled-and-veiled. The body bursts from the grave; the living God breaks free of all our grammar.

3. The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr

3.1 The Beginnings of Christian Existentialism

By 1955, when Frei finally published his doctoral thesis, the “bombshell”²⁹ impact of the second edition of Barth’s *Der Römerbrief* had been softened by a distance of some thirty-three years. In contrast to its initial reception, the debate by the 1950s had lost some of its heat: enough time had passed for its bold dialectical approach to be assimilated into theological discussion, whether in rejection or in qualified acceptance. The explosion was further muted by what was perceived as Barth’s own subsequent move away from dialectical theology to a much less fierce ‘analogical’ account of the relationship between humanity and God.

Nevertheless, this ‘bombshell’ which Barth had lobbed with such devastating accuracy was still reverberating. Understandably, the initial impact had been on European theology, but the debate continued to spread over the following decades. By the 1930s, Barth had a firm footing in the English-speaking theological world of

²⁹ The Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Adam, famously described how *Der Römerbrief* “fell like a bombshell on the playgrounds of the theologians”.

F.W. Camfield³⁰ and H. R. MacKintosh³¹, who, to their credit, were also keenly aware of the developments in Barth's thinking as expounded in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I*. In 1941, H. Richard Niebuhr admitted in the preface to *The Meaning of Revelation* that "Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth have also been my teachers".³² Later in the 1940s, Barth came to the more hostile attention of A.M. Fairweather in England, and Cornelius Van Til at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, the former flying the flag for natural theology by insisting that "God is significantly present throughout our environment"³³, while the latter was determined to label Barth as a "new modernist".³⁴ In the 1950s, two considered works by G. C. Berkouwer³⁵ came probably too late to be referenced by Frei, but his thesis did have the benefit of Hans Urs von Balthasar's book, referenced several times.

Of the above, it is Niebuhr's short monograph which most rewards attention when the topic is Hans Frei's theological development. Niebuhr was, of course, Frei's mentor and doctoral supervisor, and his elegant book shows something of Frei's own interest in the history of theology, as he explains how during the Enlightenment the doctrine of revelation gave way to a 'doctrine' of reason. Not that revelation had

³⁰ See F. W. Camfield, *Revelation and the Holy Spirit: An Essay in Barth's Theology* (London: Elliot Stock, 1933).

³¹ See H. R. MacKintosh, *Types of Modern Theology: Schleiermacher to Barth* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd, 1937). MacKintosh's analysis is also generally favourable towards Barth, although he does criticise his "excessive actualism" and, interestingly, "his persistent tendency to stress ... the dynamic aspects of Christian faith and life at the expense of the static" (314).

³² Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, x.

³³ Fairweather, *The Word as Truth*, v. Fairweather takes great exception to Barth's rejection of natural theology, here criticising Barth for how his dialectical method creates "falsely absolute alternatives between what is merely human and what is purely divine" (viii).

³⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 1946), 364. Van Til's thesis is a masterly misreading of Barth. He says of himself that he is "especially interested in setting the Theology of Crisis in the light of the broadest possible philosophical background" (viii), and although he is aware of Barth's own contention that "a true theology must be anything but systematic" (xiii), he persists in reading the Theology of Crisis as "basically informed by the principles of a modern critical philosophy" (xiii). This conclusion leads him to label Barth's theology as "The New Modernism", in that like the "Old Modernism", it is equally "destructive of historic Christian theism and with it of the significant meaning of human experience" (364). Van Til's perverse emphasis on the philosophical vestiges in *Der Römerbrief* and his seeming unawareness of the nature of Barth's project have led even von Balthasar to label his thesis "grotesque". (*The Theology of Karl Barth*, 60).

³⁵ G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955). Also G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (London: The Paternoster Press, 1956).

ceased to be a doctrine as such: rather, it was understood to be identical to reason. However, in the face of what he perceives to be an on-going liberal contempt for the doctrine, Niebuhr contends that it is time to move revelation back to the centre of the theological stage.

The Meaning of Revelation was hailed by contemporary reviewers as a highly successful treatment of the doctrine. However, the book is particularly noteworthy in that it marks one of the earliest statements of Christian existentialism in the American theological context. In his opening chapter, Niebuhr describes how the question of the “meaning of revelation” has made “a reappearance in contemporary theological discussion”³⁶, to the bemusement of the liberal tradition. He describes a fear that this debate marks a return to an old “fruitless warfare between faith and reason”, and an accompanying “reversal in the enlightenment of religious thought”.³⁷ That he was not alone in this evaluation of the theological climate of 1941 is evidenced by two of his reviewers: George W. Davis attributes “the resurgence of interest in revelation” to the “centricity awarded to the concept by the crisis theologians”³⁸; likewise, John M. Moore writes of a “resurgence of a theology of revelation in recent years”, commenting how this movement “has seemed to many to be a sheer attempt to turn back the clock and revive the outmoded concepts of a by-gone age”.³⁹ Interestingly, Moore attributes this to a “failure of nerve” on the part of a few “discouraged” theologians who – given the ‘crisis’ of the 1941 war-time context – have “retreat[ed] from reason”.⁴⁰ Old-style liberalism had not yet died out in America.

What these reviewers have patently failed to grasp, is that Niebuhr’s book is predicated on exactly the same dialectical *krisis* that they deplore in Barth. It is only his concurrent emphasis on the human reception of revelation which has lulled them

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 1.

³⁷ Ibid. 3.

³⁸ George W. Davis, “Review of H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*”, in *The Crozer Quarterly* 18 (1941), 262–4, 262.

³⁹ John M. Moore, “Review of H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*”, in *Journal of Bible and Religion* 9:2 (1941), 109–10, 109.

⁴⁰ Moore, “Review”, 109.

into a false security, that this is a restatement of the liberal position. That is why, in light of the perceived “threat to reason” posed by the “crisis theologians”, Niebuhr’s book is greeted with a broad enthusiasm for its cogent statement of a position described (though not by him) as “existentialist”. Although he clearly recognises existentialist modes of thought in Niebuhr, Moore as yet lacks this continental European terminology, and attempts to label Niebuhr’s position as “objective relativism”.⁴¹ Davis likewise easily picks out the key tenets of Niebuhr’s existentialist position, but nowhere uses the term itself, while George F. Thomas prefers Niebuhr’s own description of “critical idealism”.⁴² As it happens, of all Niebuhr’s reviewers, it is Paul Tillich alone who uses the actual term “existentialist”, recognising the book for what it is and lauding it as “the introduction into existential thinking in present American theology”.⁴³ Working from a continental theological perspective, Tillich is equipped, as the others are not, to recognise Niebuhr’s thought as following in a tradition which has come down from Kant via Marx, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger and – crucially – he includes Barth in this list. Niebuhr’s book, Tillich states confidently, succeeds in illustrating once and for all that “‘Theology of revelation’ *is* existential theology”.⁴⁴

In identifying what is new and particular about Niebuhr’s approach in *The Meaning of Revelation*, we will come close to a definition of the kind of Christian existentialism which was so dominant when Frei began his career. Tillich pinpoints three aspects of Niebuhr’s thought which, taken together, place him firmly in this category. The first is Niebuhr’s acknowledgement of the relativity of all claims to truth, which can be ‘actual’, *pro nobis*, only as they are experienced in our existential situation. This means that the revelation of God, no matter how thunderous, remains a powerless abstraction until we receive it by faith in our present historical moment. The practical conclusion which Niebuhr draws from this historical relativity is that we can posit no revelation – not even Jesus Christ – as ultimate: or rather, we can

⁴¹ Moore, “Review”, 109.

⁴² George F. Thomas, “Review of H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*”, *The Journal of Religion* 21:4 (1941), 455–60, 455.

⁴³ Paul Tillich, “Existential Thinking in American Theology”, *Religion in Life* 10:3 (1941), 452–5, 455.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 453. (my italics)

confess him as ultimate *pro nobis*, but cannot insist on his ultimacy for other people and other faiths. Niebuhr therefore refuses to follow Barth's location of the revelatory event as Jesus Christ himself, describing how "a definition of revelation in terms of the person of Jesus is manifestly inadequate".⁴⁵ This is why, for Niebuhr, theology cannot be done 'dogmatically'. Despite his acknowledged indebtedness to Barth, this is what lies at the root of Niebuhr's self-differentiation from his "teacher". For Niebuhr, the grammar of dogmatism, such as he understands Barth as espousing, consists of nothing but empty metaphysical statements, divorced from the Christian's faith experience and bearing no relation to any kind of ontological reality, human or divine.

The second, related point which Tillich detects is that this experiential account of revelation necessitates a dual understanding of history. Tillich fully comprehends Niebuhr's distinction between 'internal' and 'external' history, between "history as lived" and "history as seen".⁴⁶ He also comprehends why Niebuhr locates revelation in 'internal' history, given that Niebuhr understands revelation as the event which makes sense of our existence:

Sometimes when we read a difficult book, seeking to follow a complicated argument, we come across a luminous sentence from which we can go forward and backward and so attain some understanding of the whole. Revelation is like that.⁴⁷

It is worth noting that Niebuhr is transferring to the person of Jesus the same non-revelatory quality that Barth – and indeed Calvin – apply to scripture. Where for Barth, the Bible has no revelatory meaning in itself until we receive it by the Holy Spirit, for Niebuhr, even the Jesus-event has no objective meaning in itself, but has meaning only as it becomes meaning for us. Nevertheless, as Tillich perceives, Niebuhr's existentialism "does not exclude, but strongly demands external history".⁴⁸ In other words, and in true dialectical fashion, Jesus' external historical actuality remains for the Christian existentialist the necessary logical 'precondition' of the internal event – just as the 'external' words of the Bible text are the logical 'precondition' of their illumination.

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 148.

⁴⁶ Tillich, "Existential Thinking", 453.

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 68.

⁴⁸ Tillich, "Existential Thinking", 453.

Lastly, Tillich recognises in Niebuhr the classic dialectical emphasis on God as Absolute Subject, without whose revelation there would be no knowledge of God at all. Not that for Niebuhr there is any concrete content we can predicate of God, who remains ontologically Wholly Other, and thus beyond all grammatical expression even in the epistemic event of revelation. Hence, we can never say that we know God; far better to say that we are known *by* God. Indeed, revelation can be firmly located in the existential moment when we know ourselves to be thus known.

The result for Niebuhr, and for Christian existentialist theology as it developed, is that the believer has a far more participatory role in revelation than in the Barthian scheme. For Barth, the faith of the individual is part and parcel of the revelation of God in itself; by contrast, for the Christian existentialist, while faith is certainly given in the moment of revelation and not possessed in any sense, nevertheless knowledge of God comes about only in the moment when the individual says ‘Yes!’ to God’s self-revealing. (Barth’s individual is *unable* to say ‘Yes!’) However, the knowledge gained thereby, that one is known by God, is knowledge not so much of God as of the human self. In other words, the being and content of God in the existentialist scheme remain as epistemologically unavailable as if there had been no revelation at all. This is no lacuna, but is in fact a central tenet of existentialist theology, as will become apparent in later chapters, particularly Chapter 5.

While he does not make great use of the movement’s specialist vocabulary, there is nevertheless enough conceptual evidence in *The Meaning of Revelation* for us to concur with Tillich’s assertion that Niebuhr is attempting “to interpret the idea of revelation in existential terms”.⁴⁹ Whether Niebuhr himself would have been happy with the label is another matter: with his emphasis on the church community he was much less individualistic than most ‘secular’ existentialism. In addition, his faith in God’s unifying power meant that he refused the idea of a dialectic that was absolute, whether that dialectic was between internal and external history, between the Self and meaning, or between the world and God. It was Frei himself who pointed out in a later essay, that Niebuhr was “usually restless with full, residual dualisms, moral as

⁴⁹ Tillich, “Existential Thinking”, 452.

well as epistemological”.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, *The Meaning of Revelation* is a persuasive presentation of the Christian existentialist position at one of its principal points of entry into American theology, and a key influence on Frei.

3.2 Neo-Orthodoxy: A Definition

Frei spend the years immediately after the publication of his doctoral thesis wrestling with this Christian existentialist inheritance from Niebuhr, and with its contemporary manifestation as the ‘Neo-Orthodox’ school. At this point, some attempt must be made at a definition of terms. The central tenets of existentialist theology have already been outlined above, as defined by Tillich in reference to Niebuhr. Furthermore, in “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, Frei identifies a wide spectrum of thinkers and theologies who nevertheless can be loosely grouped together under the heading, ‘existentialist’: not only ‘obvious’ candidates such as Kierkegaard and Martin Buber, but also Emil Brunner, Karl Heim, John Baillie, H. H. Farmer, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Hendrik Kraemer. However, Frei separates these out from the *krisis* theologians such as Barth and Tillich, who ground the knowledge of God not so much in the ‘I-thou’ encounter, but in “the act of God, identical with His being”.⁵¹

It is this second group of theologians who comprise what became known as the ‘Neo-Orthodox’ school of theology. In the same volume, there is another little essay by Langdon Gilkey⁵² which usefully defines for us this particular mid-twentieth century movement. Gilkey sees Neo-Orthodoxy as a broad movement, with Barth on the “orthodox” wing and Tillich on the “liberal”, united nevertheless by “the desire to reinterpret Christian doctrine in terms of the transcendence of God and of His grace, and in terms of the inability of natural and cultural man to save himself.”⁵³ However, this common inclusion of Barth in the category, ‘Neo-Orthodox’, is

⁵⁰ Hans W. Frei, “H. Richard Niebuhr on History, Church, and Nation”, in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 213–223), 223.

⁵¹ Frei, “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, 318.

⁵² Langdon B. Gilkey, “Neo-Orthodoxy”, in *A Handbook of Christian Theology: Essential Information for Every Christian*, Marvin Halverson & Arthur Cohen, eds, (London & Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1958), 258–62.

⁵³ Gilkey, “Neo-Orthodoxy”, 259.

perhaps as unfortunate as the inclusion of Frei in ‘The Yale School’. The all-encompassing label has the effect of ironing out vital differences, particularly given that the central tenets of Neo-Orthodoxy were based on the reading in English of Barth’s early theology. However, this meant that the Neo-Orthodox movement overlooked such vital aspects of Barth’s theology as his re-working of the doctrine of election and the development of his much more explicitly christological prolegomena.⁵⁴ Moreover, as the movement develops, it becomes harder and harder to separate out Christian existentialism from Neo-Orthodoxy. Certainly, Niebuhr is commonly included in the list of the Neo-Orthodox; Tillich frequently makes use of existentialist categories, especially that of “authenticity”⁵⁵; and Rudolf Bultmann, a supremely dialectical theologian and an early comrade of Barth’s, is highly influenced by his colleague at Marburg, the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger.⁵⁶ The spectrum which Gilkey identifies is more than a spectrum: it is in fact an almost entirely different set of priorities subsumed under some superficial similarities.

For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, the proposal is to *exclude* Barth from the category, ‘Neo-Orthodox’.⁵⁷ The principal reason for this exclusion is that Frei’s mature theological project was increasingly carried out in clear opposition to the Neo-Orthodox school⁵⁸, while at the same time he never abandoned his allegiance to

⁵⁴ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of God*, (London & New York: T & T Clark International, 2000). For an account of Barth’s ‘turn to election’, see McCormack, “Grace and Being”.

⁵⁵ See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

⁵⁶ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

⁵⁷ This is also the conclusion of Bruce McCormack, whose introduction to *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* is titled, “The Von Balthasar Thesis and the Myth of the Neo-Orthodox Barth”. See pages 1–30.

⁵⁸ For example, James F. Kay describes Frei’s position as being “in conscious opposition to Bultmann’s *Christus praesens*”. James F. Kay, *Christus Praesens: A Reconsideration of Rudolf Bultmann’s Christology*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 125. However, to confuse matters, Bruce McCormack actually includes Frei himself in the category of ‘Neo-Orthodox’, writing how “His first great work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, established him ... as the leading defender of ... “neoorthodoxy”.” (Bruce L. McCormack, “Beyond Nonfoundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth: Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology”, in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 109–65, 115. This is despite McCormack’s own acknowledgement that Frei was critical of the term, and critical too of what he saw as the wrong-headed identification of Barth with the Neo-Orthodox movement. See Frei’s 1976 essay, “Eberhard Busch’s Biography of Karl Barth”, in *Types of Christian Theology*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 147–63, 147.

Barth. Rather, 'Neo-Orthodox' will be used as a descriptor of a theological position which takes from the early Barth the principle of the absolute dialectic between God and world, but combines it with two particular expressions of existentialism. The first of these expressions is the concept of the 'I-Thou' subject-subject encounter learned from Kierkegaard and Buber⁵⁹; and the second is the anxiety about the meaning of human being and existence, as typified by Heidegger. Accordingly, the terms 'Neo-Orthodox' and/or 'existentialist' theology/theologians will henceforth be used synonymously unless otherwise stated, and should be understood as defined here. However, when the term 'dialectical theologians', or '*krisis* theologians' is used, this should be understood as including both Barth and the Neo-Orthodox/existentialist schools.

3.3 H. Richard Niebuhr and the Logic of Belief

For all that Frei, with the exception of Niebuhr, rarely tackles its proponents directly in print, the Neo-Orthodox school gradually became the theological opposition which was to inspire his most creative resistance and strongest positive statements. Nevertheless, he begins with an appreciation. In his 1957 essay, "Niebuhr's Theological Background", Frei spends some time tracing the epistemological issues at the core of the development of Neo-Orthodoxy, pointing out that through all their variations, the dialectical theologians were nevertheless gnawing away at the same questions which had first been posed by Kant. To summarise with cruel brevity his epistemological thesis⁶⁰, Kant undid some of the previous sharp distinction between the knowing Subject and the Object which is to be known, pointing out that our knowledge of the Other is always filtered through our own perception. Therefore, God-*an-sich* cannot be known, not even in revelation. It follows then, that for all that the Subject God may indeed possess absolute ontological reality *an sich* – and no one is denying that – for us, that Subject can never be an object of concrete knowledge. In grammatical terms, this means that God has been removed from the

⁵⁹ See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937).

⁶⁰ See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*,. For a more considered treatment of Kant's thesis, see Jay F. Rosenberg, *Accessing Kant : A Relaxed Introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason*, (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 2005). Also the collection of essays edited by Ralph Walker, *Kant on Pure Reason*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

logical chain, being neither the subject of the predicate of revelation, nor an object for our knowledge. This has some potentially devastating results for the theological enterprise, for it means that nothing can be said of God that is metaphysically ‘true’, so that apart from the most uncompromising kind of apophaticism, we are now struggling to say anything theological at all.

As Frei explains, the existentialist theologians took this epistemological problem very seriously. Barth had taught them that Kant was right to say that we can have no knowledge of God as he is in himself, but added the vital proviso: *except as he gives himself as Object to our knowledge through revelation*:

Barth insists that our only knowledge of God is due to the fact that as abiding Subject, Agent, or Spirit, God nevertheless has made Himself a unique object for human understanding in the incarnation of Jesus Christ – and this miraculously without relinquishing His Freedom as absolute, untrammelled Agent over created agency and human reasoning.⁶¹

For the existentialists, however, this did not fully resolve the problem. They agreed absolutely with Barth’s point about transcendent revelation being the only source of our knowledge about God, but did not accept Kant’s hypothesis, that a person, a living self, could be an object along the same lines as any inanimate object, or ‘thing’. For God to be Object in this sense would be for God to be less than animate: it would mean to remove God from God’s own Subject-Self as “the center of free, self-originating activity”⁶², so that God would effectively cease to ‘be’. This is because ontologically, for an existentialist theologian, “an individual is *nothing* but his decision in freedom and responsibility”⁶³.

Therefore, it is only as Subject that God can be known in relationship – and unless there is a relationship, there is only speculative metaphysics and no actual knowledge. Niebuhr himself expressed this clearly in 1956, the year before Frei’s analysis:

Theology ... considered as a pure science does not have as its object God in isolation ... The God who makes himself known and whom the church seeks to know is no isolated God. If the attribute of aseity, i.e., being by and for itself, is applicable to him at all it is not applicable to him as known by the Church. What is known and knowable in theology is God

⁶¹ Frei, “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, 319.

⁶² Frei, “Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr”, 81.

⁶³ Frei, “Niebuhr’s Theological Background”, 18. (my italics)

in relation to self and to neighbour, and self and neighbour in relation to God. This complex of related beings is the object of theology.⁶⁴

As Frei explains, “At this point (Niebuhr) feels the claims of the nineteenth century to be justified ... one cannot allow a speculative, empty ontology to separate God’s objectivity, his freedom and Lordship, and absolute priority in revelation, from his relationship with us”.⁶⁵ This is the area where, despite his declaration that Barth had been his “teacher”, Niebuhr most departs from Barth. To put it baldly, Barth begins with ontology, with the divine side of the dialectic; by contrast, while assuming exactly the same dialectic, Niebuhr begins with epistemology, the human side of the dialectic. While the existentialists differ radically from the liberal theologians in their keenness to assert a theological realism, it seems that Barth’s version of the reality of God is that little bit too extreme for them, based on the same kind of metaphysical abstraction which Kant argued can never yield any kind of practical knowledge. ‘Real’ in existentialist terms can only mean ‘real in *this* world’: if God is somehow too real *an sich*, then God ceases to be real-for-us, and so loses all ability to communicate. But if we describe God in the existential encounter, then that description is at the least *relatively* true and accurate – and so that is where theology must begin. The meeting – the clash, even – of Absolute Subject with our own relative subjecthood in the act of communication and decision, is the prolegomena for the existentialist theological programme.

This relativity of the existential encounter is vital to Niebuhr’s understanding of revelation. As both an observer and a participator in God’s revelatory history, the individual is essentially a relative creature subject to relative truths. As such, the existential person has no absolute being *an sich*, let alone any absolute knowledge of reality:

The understanding that the spatio-temporal point of view of an observer enters into his knowledge of reality, so that no universal knowledge of things as they are in themselves is possible, so that all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower.⁶⁶

Niebuhr attributes this concept of the historical relativity of the human subject to his reading of Troeltsch:

⁶⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 112–13.

⁶⁵ Frei, “Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr”, 87.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 7.

He [Troeltsch] has helped me to accept and to profit by the acceptance of the relativity not only of historical objects but, more, of the historical subject, the observer and interpreter.⁶⁷

This means that as historical subjects, neither the individual Christian, nor the church, nor yet the theologian, has any absolute and unchanging apprehension of truth, not even when given through revelation. As had the nineteenth century theologians before him, Niebuhr has “discovered that Christianity is not a ready-made eternal constant but a genuine product of historical change”.⁶⁸ To be “constant” is to be transhistorical, to be metaphysical, to be a concept only, with no reality. Even God must be denied this attribute of absolute immutability and impassability, at least when it comes to revelation. Crucially, this means that neither history nor revelation can be subsumed under a uniform method of interpretation. There can be no overarching hermeneutical theory, given that both history and revelation are acts of God, and therefore both are a series of one-off and unrepeatable events. Niebuhr, as did Frei after him, abhors a system.

This refusal of metaphysics has implications for Frei’s search for the concrete content of God, for it means that a possible recourse to the traditional divine attributes has been ruled out. This again is a key point where Niebuhr departs from the early Barth, although in this case he actually anticipates one of Barth’s later moves. *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik II/1*, published the year before *The Meaning of Revelation*, contains a section on the “perfections”⁶⁹ of God: an exposition which Bruce McCormack attributes to “to the presence of residual elements of classical theism (and the ancient metaphysics which made it possible)”.⁷⁰ Continuing, McCormack suggests that it was not until volume II/2 of the *Church Dogmatics*, with its detailed treatment of the doctrine of election, that Barth finally becomes a truly “post-metaphysical” theologian – and this was published the year after. Eventually, of course, Barth comes to see what Niebuhr recognised before him, that the ‘divine attributes’ as traditionally understood are yet another human attempt to tell God what God is and ought to be. As Colin Gunton explains, Barth ultimately concludes that

⁶⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1952), 14.

⁶⁸ Frei, “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, 320.

⁶⁹ See Barth, *CDIII/1*, 322–50, and following chapters.

⁷⁰ Bruce L. McCormack, “Seek God where he may be found: a response to Edwin Chr. Van Driel”, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007), 62–79, 64–5.

“it is not a matter of what *we attribute*, but of what he [God] *reveals himself* to be.”⁷¹ Given that Frei shared this anti-metaphysical stance with Barth and Niebuhr, which was in its turn inherited from Schleiermacherian theology, the divine attributes do not offer him a means of describing the content of God, lacking as they do both ontological and existential reality.

Like Barth, Niebuhr held to the conviction that God’s self-revelation is never a given, never a constant, but always an act. However, Niebuhr’s innovation – where he departs from Barth and also from many of his fellow existentialist theologians – was to try *within the dialectical schema* to rehabilitate the liberal perception of the presence of God in reason, culture and history, without making the old liberal ‘error’ of surrendering the sovereign otherness of God. It was a shaky tightrope to walk, made all the more difficult by Niebuhr’s refusal to locate revelation absolutely in the Jesus event. Frei describes how, almost uniquely for a dialectical theologian, Niebuhr is “theocentric rather than Christocentric ... for we always face God”.⁷² Indeed, for all the Jesus event acts as foundation, model, and guarantor of revelation – Tillich’s point in his review about external history being the necessary pre-condition of internal history – Niebuhr’s ‘radical monotheism’ meant that he could view this particular revelatory act neither as ultimate nor as absolute:

A definition of revelation in terms of the person of Jesus is manifestly inadequate. The problems which it raises are insuperable. How can we have personal communion with one who exists only in our memory and in the monuments, the books and sentences, which are the body of our memory? How can the letter and the document become a carrier of personal life unless they are part of the expressive body of a now living spirit? When we pursue this inquiry we are inclined to say that the living being with which we have fellowship is really the church of Jesus or the spirit of the church. The latter becomes the real incarnation of the person of Jesus and faith is directed toward the community itself. What is revealed in our history at the decisive point is not the person of Jesus but the fellowship of the church ... But this way lies disaster.⁷³

Historical relativity meant for Niebuhr, that God’s revelation could not be limited to the Jesus-event, for that would be to threaten the absolute subjecthood of God. There is therefore a tendency with Niebuhr, which is fairly unique in existentialist theology although entirely consistent with it, to play down the importance of Jesus Christ: his importance to the individual faith-experience is not the same as postulating his

⁷¹ Colin Gunton, *Act and Being*, (London: SCM Press, 2002), 9.

⁷² Frei, “Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr”, 67.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 148–9.

universal significance. Hence, when Niebuhr talks about ‘presence’, he means not the presence of Jesus Christ (who exists only in “memory” and “monuments”), but the presence of God. Accordingly, Niebuhr has little account to give of the resurrection: Jesus is not actually living as such, except in the sense that in the revelatory moment he has become *our* history. But he is not an objective presence to us. Only God is present in the moment of revelation, “more fundamental and more certain than Jesus or than self”.⁷⁴

Therefore, where Barth saw Jesus as *the* revelation of God, for Niebuhr is it more accurate to regard him as *a* revelation, unrepeatable and miraculous certainly, but not particularly to be distinguished from all other unrepeatable and miraculous revelatory events. Nevertheless, Niebuhr holds that Jesus retains a certain importance for the Christian as an ‘external’ and necessary precondition, not of revelation itself (which is conditional only on God’s will), but of our understanding of how God works in our world:

The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is now trusted and known as the contemporary God, revealing himself in every event; but we do not understand how we could trace his working in these happenings if he did not make himself known to us through the memory of Jesus Christ’ nor do we know how we should be able to interpret all the words we read as words of God save by the aid of this Rosetta stone.⁷⁵

So for Niebuhr, the Jesus-event acts as a ‘guarantor’ of revelation in the present historical moment. Jesus is therefore better understood, not as revelation-in-himself, but as a kind of hermeneutical key to revelation in history, so that any experience of revelation can, for the Christian, be referred back to that event, and so take its place in a shared grammatical and doctrinal framework for understanding and interpretation.

However, rather than providing doctrinal knowledge of God *an sich*, revelation is better understood as exactly that moment in our history “through which we know ourselves to be known from beginning to end”.⁷⁶ Further, from the standpoint of that personal encounter, the theologian can detect God’s providential presence in all

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 152.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 154.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 152.

history, which itself is known by God “from beginning to end”. Epistemologically, then, Niebuhr posits a dual starting-point for the knowledge of God: the experiential and internal history of the individual, which takes its place within the history of culture and church. This is no immanent revelation in the world: for Niebuhr, the dialectic still holds, and we have no immediate apprehension of the inner life of either Jesus or God. But we do have a revelatory encounter with the Subject God in our own inner life, and that meeting is immune to abstractive classification. For this reason Niebuhr contends that the appropriate way of theologising can never be doctrinal or propositional, still less apologetic, but must always be confessional and relative: “only in the direct confession of the heart.”⁷⁷

3.4 Frei’s Analysis of Niebuhr

Our interest, however, is not so much in Niebuhr himself, as in Frei’s understanding of Niebuhr, and what over time he came to accept and reject. We can infer some disquiet with his mentor’s theological programme simply from the existence of Frei’s 1975 book, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*: Niebuhr, by contrast, is uninterested in Jesus of Nazareth as a person, and insistent always on revelation being understood as *God* in action. Not that Niebuhr would deny that the revelatory act that was Jesus reveals God. But in accordance with his particular dialectical understanding of the ‘event’ of revelation, this identity of God with the Jesus-event cannot be continuous for us in our time. God’s revelation to us now is not dependent on his revelation then, and when we encounter God, it is God we encounter, not Jesus. Thus, as Frei later observes, while Niebuhr swallowed whole the principle of the dialectic, he “could not swallow ... the startlingly consistent Barthian identity of universal divine action with divine action in Christ alone”⁷⁸, and so took the dialectical ‘event-theology’ of revelation in a direction which Barth never countenanced.

There is much, then, that Frei disliked, or came to dislike, about Niebuhr’s theology. However, there is also much that he admired and imported into his own theological enterprises. He approves wholeheartedly of Niebuhr’s emphasis on the historically

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 154.

⁷⁸ Frei, “Niebuhr on History”, 228.

unique subjecthood of each individual person: concepts which he explores in depth in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. He admires also the way in which Niebuhr's theological writings actually embody what Frei was trying to say about *ad hoc* methodology, how form should be dictated by content, and not the other way around:

The Meaning of Revelation, for example, keeps the reader in an actual intellectual motion reduplicating that of the book, and just as real ... Form and content are so completely appropriate to one another that the style is assimilated to and shaped by the thought.⁷⁹

Moreover, the 'confessional' aspect of Niebuhr's theology was highly congenial to Frei, although ultimately he prefers Barth's objective and doctrinally rich version over Niebuhr's content-light relational approach. There is also Niebuhr's refusal of metaphysics and of the divine attributes as constituting the content of God. And finally, Frei appreciates Niebuhr's perception of the relativity of history: the 'system' which Niebuhr refused was no mere methodology, but the kind of Hegelian project which sought to account for all history and for God's own self in one all-encompassing scheme, so collapsing the uniqueness of both. For Frei, this would have been a vital counter-emphasis to Barth's abiding liking for "a little Hegeling".⁸⁰

However, we have to ask whether Niebuhr's existentialist answer to Frei's question about the content of God is genuinely a more concrete account. Barth had assumed an ontological starting point by emphasising that 'God has spoken' – a subject and a predicate which for Barth are inseparable, given that the predicate 'has spoken' refers to the revelation which is Jesus Christ. However, what Niebuhr does is separate out the *deus* and the *dixit*, so that the *dixit* becomes epistemological rather than ontological. Thus, by denying the ultimacy of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, which is the same as denying the ontological identity of God and Jesus, Niebuhr has in effect divorced God from God's own speaking. This removes God, even in the moment of self-revelation *for us*, to an unknowable dialectical distance.

While Frei initially expressed the hope, in "Religion (Natural and Revealed)", that Niebuhr's "two types of history" might provide a way forward, he came to realise that the question about the content of God is a futile one in the existentialist scheme.

⁷⁹ Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background", 16.

⁸⁰ A phrase used by Barth in conversation, Sept. 1953, cited by Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life in Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, (London and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 387.

In “The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr”, Frei asks, “What does it mean [to Niebuhr] to know the content of the Word of God?” And then he answers for him: “It means less a concrete apprehension of the person than it does a negative knowledge of ourselves as being known, being believed in, being valued. Such a notion,” he continues, “can tell us nothing about the content that is revealed, except by the most tenuous sort of inferential judgement.”⁸¹ In other words, Niebuhr has denied the very possibility of apprehending, let alone describing any content to God: his epistemological starting point leads to no knowledge of the being of God at all, so that the grammatical and doctrinal question never even gets asked. This did not necessarily worry Niebuhr, who disliked doctrinal formulations and saw himself as working in a confessional theology. Indeed, he would have decried the very idea of attributing content to the God who confronts us as Other. But it is Frei’s judgement that this non-acceptance of Jesus as God’s full revelation results in a curiously empty idea of God who, even in the very act of revelation, effectively reveals nothing. Not only did Niebuhr have no answer to offer Frei, but he assumed also that it was foolish to search for an answer, when there was clearly no answer to be found.

4. The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher

4.1 Schleiermacher and Frei: An Uneasy Similarity

Frei takes his time before turning to the ‘founder’ of nineteenth century liberal theology. As “Religion (Natural and Revealed)” demonstrates, Schleiermacher is so out of theological fashion in 1958, that it is almost axiomatic that he be dismissed as an irrelevance. Nevertheless, and perhaps to Frei’s surprise, in his reactions to and against both Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy, he occasionally finds himself sharing a theological platform with Schleiermacher. In rather the same way that Barth adopted Hegelian-style language and categories as part of his resistance to Schleiermacherian relationalism, so too Frei, in his opposition to dialectical theology in its existentialist form, found himself almost obliged to work within the old liberal categories. In

⁸¹ Frei, “Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr”, 83–4.

particular, he skirts dangerously close to a liberal-style ‘life of Jesus’ in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*; and meanwhile, his interest in biblical hermeneutics was always going to take him within earshot of the siren call of general revelation. Just as Barth struggled to express his dialectical theology while yet resisting Idealism, so too had Frei ever to resist the answers that had already been proffered by Schleiermacher.

Perhaps for this reason, Frei’s first major treatment of Schleiermacher’s biblical hermeneutics, in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, is harsh. Here Frei judges that Schleiermacher had utterly failed in his attempt to find a transcendent hermeneutical method which could be applied equally to all texts and all revelatory utterances. He is particularly savage on what he perceives to be Schleiermacher’s failure to develop a hermeneutic adequate to the task of reading realistic narrative in general, and the gospel narratives in particular. Previously in *Eclipse*, Frei had demonstrated how, under an Enlightenment rationalist hermeneutic, the narrative meaning of the gospels had been obscured by “the search for the subject matter beyond the text”.⁸² Particularly after Kant, not even the Bible could be regarded as exempt from a hermeneutic of universal reason, in which scripture becomes an historical phenomenon open to investigation. This hermeneutic of reason necessitates that if the Bible is to be judged as having any ‘meaning’, then it must first of all be explicated according to historical-factual criteria, so that its content and context might be recognised and explained. The second step, if ‘meaning’ is to be maintained, is then to apply the explicated text to the modern context – if indeed that could be done. D. F. Strauss’ pastoral concern with the problems of preaching a ‘mythology’ which one no longer believed to be ‘factual’ in any sense, marks what Frei sees as the failure of this Enlightenment project.⁸³

⁸² Frei, *Eclipse*, 312–13.

⁸³ Strauss writes in 1835–6, how the theologically-aware preacher “may find himself driven either directly to state his opinions, and attempt to elevate the people to his ideas; or, since this attempt must necessarily fail, carefully to adapt himself to the conception of the community; or, lastly, since, even on this plan, he may easily betray himself, in the end to leave the ministerial profession”. David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, (New York: Cosimo, 2009), 784.

The problem this posed for the following generation of theologians was profound. As Dan Stiver comments, “Theology in modernity faced a catch-22 of either sacrificing the mystery of God to meet objectivist standards or of sacrificing the cogency of belief in God altogether to place theology in a risk-free fideistic zone of private belief”.⁸⁴ Schleiermacher was in absolute accord with the Enlightenment demand for an objective and rigorously academic basis for theology, particularly in his development of a new faculty system for the University of Berlin.⁸⁵ At the same time, it was vital to him, as a Christian and pastor, that theology did not surrender entirely to the demands of rationalism, but maintained both the inviolable subjectivity of religious experience alongside the inviolable subjectivity of God.

Schleiermacher’s innovative response to the conundrum was to restate the *epistemological* question of the knowledge of God as a *hermeneutical* one. Not that he could return to a “pre-Kantian stance, for which either knowing or understanding would be a merely isomorphic internal reproduction of given external data”⁸⁶: that is, an understanding of the simple sense of the words and a faith in their ability directly to convey meaning. Nevertheless, Schleiermacher found the Enlightenment one-word, one-referent model far too static for his more dynamic conception of meaning, and further, judged it to be too bound to historical phenomena to be spiritually useful. And so it was Schleiermacher who, post-Kant, renewed the focus on hermeneutics in order to make the point that, even if all other subject-matters are indeed self-evident to a hermeneutic of universal reason, this does not apply to God. This is because God can be no external ‘object’ to be subjected to scientific scrutiny; for, as Schleiermacher described it in faithful Kantian terms, “anything that is outwardly given must be given as an object exposed to our counter-influence, however slight that may be.”⁸⁷ To conceive of God as an object is therefore to make a logical nonsense of the whole idea of God.

⁸⁴ Dan R. Stiver, “Theological Method”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 170–85, 174.

⁸⁵ For an account of Schleiermacher’s pioneering work in designing the modern university faculty system in Berlin, see Richard Crouter, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Chapter 6.

⁸⁶ Frei, *Eclipse*, 288.

⁸⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 18.

Schleiermacher's alternative proposal in *The Christian Faith* – that masterpiece of systematic theology – was that revelation should be understood as a consciousness of absolute dependence, which then becomes for us “a consciousness of God.”⁸⁸ In his anxiety to protect religious experience from scientific cause-and-effect rationality, Schleiermacher refers such religious experience, not to a natural, but to a “divine causality”.⁸⁹ However, this causality is “original”, qualitatively no different from the cause of the entire universe. “In the same sense,” he writes, “Paul calls even the world the original revelation of God.”⁹⁰ Therefore revelation, while remaining a ‘gift’, is entirely contiguous with the processes and progress of nature and civilisation, built as it is into the very fabric of the world. As a result, revelation does not contradict reason, even while it adds something new, for even a supernatural revelation must be explicable according to the rational logic of grammar, “subject to the same laws of conception and synthesis as regulate all speech”.⁹¹

Furthermore, the ability of humankind to receive revelation is an inherent one, given at creation: as Schleiermacher observes, “even the Protevangelium, by linking the prediction of Christ directly to the Fall, declares entirely against the idea that human nature is somehow incapable of taking up into itself the restorative divine element and that the power to do so must first be introduced to it.”⁹² The alternative is for God to be entirely arbitrary, contradicting the causality which had been established by God in the first place. Therefore Schleiermacher understands even the divine element in Jesus as merely the fullest flowering of the possibility which is inherent in all human nature, “grounded in its original constitution and prepared for by all its past history”.⁹³ Otherwise, God's favouring of Jesus in this way breaks rather than confirms the divine causality.

⁸⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 18.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 50.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 51.

⁹¹ Ibid. 67.

⁹² Ibid. 64.

⁹³ Ibid.

Here, then, we have the basis of a general hermeneutic. This general hermeneutic is grounded not on universal reason, nor yet on any theory of a universal language, but rather, in the universal grammatical modes of interpretation that can be applied to any act of communication. In brief, Schleiermacher's "hermeneutic of understanding" takes the following form.⁹⁴ Whenever a listener hears a communication, what is envisaged is a meeting of equals. The speaker and listener are in a reciprocal relationship, while yet remaining entirely separate entities, so that each 'other' has "a kind of determinate, independently describable character".⁹⁵ (Not for Schleiermacher a Hegelian-style synthesis: he is in his own way as dialectical a theologian as his 20th century detractors.) Yet an attempt at communication has been made on the speaker's part, while the hearer on their part is attempting to understand. It is through this dialectical meeting of equals-yet-opposites that understanding emerges.

In describing this encounter as it occurs in all attempts at communication, Schleiermacher is positing a universal hermeneutic of understanding, as applicable to divine revelation as it is to any human communication. Moreover, this ability to understand a communication from God was implanted by God at the beginning in all our consciousnesses. Therefore, it is appropriate to envisage some kind of 'meeting of equals' when God communicates with humankind, otherwise revelation would be an absolute impossibility. On that basis, it is clear to Schleiermacher that we are concerned to understand a Subject God, whose consciousness resembles our own. Therefore, when God reveals – which God does universally and generally, to all and in all – the result is universal faith: to a greater or lesser degree, we are all conscious of our dependence on God. And because this consciousness of dependence is universal, faith can indeed be examined academically. However, because God is a Subject, whom we hear subjectively, this examination cannot be conducted according to objective scientific criteria.

⁹⁴ Schleiermacher's hermeneutical programme, as delivered in a series of lectures, is available in somewhat fragmented form in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, (Montana: Scholars Press, 1977). His "hermeneutic of understanding" is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis, pages 124–9.

⁹⁵ Frei, *Eclipse*, 291.

Throughout *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher is struggling to hold in balance an account of revelation as the immanence of God in every person's consciousness, alongside the traditional Christian affirmation of Jesus Christ. Schleiermacher does indeed have a doctrine of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his absolute necessity for our salvation, but not even Jesus could be regarded as a miraculous inbreaking of the divine into history – for that would be to violate utterly the 'otherness' of God. This is not to say that the Redeemer did not have a real existence in history: Schleiermacher insists that "the ideal must have been completely historical in him"⁹⁶, so that the person of Jesus cannot be abstracted as a consciousness apart from a physical existence. (That would be to posit a purely metaphysical being: an ontological abstraction without any corresponding epistemological dimension.) But real though he was, Jesus redeems, not by his life, death, and resurrection, but by means of his supreme God-consciousness, which has given future generations a kind of conduit to God. Epistemologically, then, we know God, not through the resurrected presence of Jesus Christ, nor in the objective historical and supra-historical events of his life, but through God's revelation to our consciousness.

Thus Schleiermacher transfers revelation across from objective history to the subjective realm. Nevertheless, he would claim that 'subjective' experience is fully historical, and therefore not so subjective as it might at first appear: 'subjective-realist' might be a fair term. Indeed, his whole dogmatic system is built upon the 'reality' of the human faith experience – something clearly much more 'real' than is God. But neither is he saying that God is not ontologically 'real'. It is only that God's reality is so far beyond human comprehension, that we cannot start our theology from that reality, but only as we experience it. In other words, Schleiermacher is vehemently antimetaphysical, and rejects any theology which begins with a divine ontology. As the structure of *The Christian Faith* illustrates, doctrine must be constructed retrospectively, according to the development of our consciousness of God, even to the extent of following in our theological system the order of that development. Thus the human consciousness of God becomes the epistemological starting point for all our attributions of content to God.

⁹⁶ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 377.

4.2 Frei's Analysis of Schleiermacher

The epistemological question had therefore shifted under Schleiermacher. As he presents it, the question becomes, not *how we can know God?* (for God is not an object to be known), but *how we can hear God's self-communication?* The point is to find a way of hearing God's revelation so that we have concrete knowledge of the content of God-the-speaker, but do not in the process violate God's sovereign subjectivity. For all his profound disagreement with Schleiermacher's subjectivist approach, the great kinship between Frei and Schleiermacher is that, in a different way and for a different time, Frei too considers the epistemological question to be a hermeneutical one.

As detected by Frei, the practical result of this general hermeneutical method is that the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus Christ are no longer constitutive of his identity. Indeed, it would have been easier to have arrived at an understanding of his supreme God-consciousness without the litter of contingent events which the synoptics in particular pile up around him. So, for all God's 'inner' presence to his God-consciousness, and for all that Jesus was completely historical, it turns out that God was never 'actually' present at all in our history. Rather, history must be 'got rid of' if we are to penetrate through to God's being. Tellingly, Schleiermacher is rather astonishingly dismissive of the Old Testament as a whole, firmly rejecting the accounts it gives of God's direct and miraculous interventions in human affairs. Similarly, he tends to regard the miracles of Jesus as mythical expressions of the disciples' faith rather than as actual happenings. For Schleiermacher, God's ultimate revelation was to Jesus' supreme God-consciousness, which sounds like a positive statement – until one realises that it means that revelation has nothing to do with Jesus' actual physical being, nothing to do with what he did and said, and certainly nothing to do with the 'accidental' events of his historical life. As a result, Jesus' identity as redeemer has no relation whatsoever to his death and resurrection, despite every insistence of scripture to the contrary.

Hence Frei's conclusion, that while Schleiermacher succeeded in protecting the concept of God from historical-rational critique, he did so at a price. Nevertheless, Schleiermacher's honourable attempt to give an account of God's revelation as both

immanent and profoundly historical has been useful for Frei in that, together with his critic Strauss, he did at least identify the key elements necessary for a doctrine of revelation in history. Essentially, if revelation is regarded as the historically-fixed, irrevocably-past Jesus event, *and that alone*, then God has nothing to say to us in the present. As Schleiermacher himself put it, “A thing no longer really exists, but becomes a mere matter of history, when it can exercise no further activity.”⁹⁷ However saving or atoning that event might have been, if revelation is not also a *present* event then God has once again retreated into a deistic mode and has no communication with his creation. Ontologically, he would be a mere metaphysical abstraction, scarcely deserving of the appellation of ‘being’. This was the danger Frei perceived at one extreme end of dialectical theology, which paid attention only to the event of revelation, and not to the human reception of it. Somehow, if Frei was going to embark on his own scripture-based hermeneutical account of the content of God, then a test of its success would be if it could give an account of revelation now, as well as then.

5. Concluding observations

Of the three main understandings of revelation available to him, not one of them taken on its own entirely answers Frei’s concern about the content of God. Where Barth provides the dialectical underpinning, the ontological realism, and the correspondingly realist christological basis for any doctrine of revelation, nevertheless there was what seemed to be a down-playing of epistemology to deal with. In Chapter 2, we shall see how this was not quite the case; but for the moment, at least in Barth’s early theology, it is not quite clear how revelation becomes “intelligibly significant” for us. Niebuhr, of course, had a more positive account of human receptivity, and a useful insistence that revelation must take a present *pro nobis* form if it is to be called revelation at all. However, as Niebuhr himself contends, this prioritising of epistemology leads to knowledge, not so much of God, but of the self as known by God. For Niebuhr, the content of God *an sich* is

⁹⁷ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 390.

epistemologically unavailable. Of course, both Barth and Niebuhr were trying to escape the inadequacies of Schleiermacher's immanent account of revelation, but that liberal theologian did at least provide an epistemological path to a God whose presence was abiding, personal, and hermeneutically available – even if only after a great deal of effort on our part.

The point has been made, that if Frei did not wholeheartedly embrace any of the three main understandings of revelation that were available to him, it was because he found something deficient in their accounts. While all three assumed a starting point for theology in a doctrine of revelation, however that doctrine was conceived, Frei has perceived that in actuality, none of the three begin with God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Schleiermacher's actual starting point is not God, but an inherent human receptivity to God, which is the precondition of any revelation. With Barth, the situation is more complicated, for Barth knows that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the precondition to all his speaking about God. However, when it comes to the grammatical order in which he arranges his theology, Barth begins with the pure ontological subject, posited prior to any revelation, and therefore an abstraction. Barth is only saved from ending as he began, in an abstract account of God, because despite the assumption of his own logic of belief, his *actual* starting point is the concrete revelation that was Jesus Christ. But for those existentialist theologians such as Niebuhr, who signed up to the abstract starting point of *Romans* and the *Church Dogmatics*, the end result is an entirely unknowable, content-less God.

We acknowledge nevertheless that throughout Frei's career, Barth's theological position remained the one with which he had most sympathy. In the course of that career, it becomes apparent that in many, even most respects, Frei is absolutely in agreement with Barth's ontological prolegomena. For Frei as for Barth, there could be "no discernible transition" from the human to the divine, although "there is of course a transition the other way, because God has reconciled man to himself".⁹⁸ This concept of the absolute sovereignty of the Subject God, independent of human perception, is a central assumption for Frei.

⁹⁸ Hans W. Frei, "Karl Barth: Theologian", in *Theology & Narrative: Selected Essays*, Hans W. Frei, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 167–76, 172.

However, if we believe that God has indeed spoken in a way that is “intelligibly significant for its human recipients”, then we are obliged by that fact of that revelation to embark upon a process of right hearing and right reading. This is the difficult and fraught epistemological task, and crucially, Frei understands it as a hermeneutical one. Even at this early stage in his academic career, he is able to assert that if Barth is indeed right that “our relation to him is founded solely on his freedom to be for us in grace and revelation”, then “to know this is to discover it in one source only – in Scripture”:⁹⁹

It is simply true that we do need the letter of Scripture to tell us of revelation. We have no independent information of this normative object.¹⁰⁰

In other words, if God cannot be known relationally, either in history or in our own inner experience, then scripture is the theologian’s last refuge. In particular, it is our only available objective account of the one primary predicative revelation that was Jesus Christ himself. We may indeed claim to have an inner experience of or relationship with Jesus, and Frei is far from disparaging this, but that can be no foundation for theology. God’s revelation must correspond to God’s being. This means that Jesus must possess his own actuality, his own autonomy, which in turn must be understood in the same manner that it was revealed to us, as a historical, unsubstitutable person.¹⁰¹

It is exactly at this point that Frei detects the gap in Barth’s theology. If Jesus Christ is indeed the ‘concrete content’, or the predicate, of God, then that begs the question: what is the ‘concrete content’ of Jesus? Frei was later to make this his grand project: adding a fleshly Jesus of Nazareth to what he saw as Barth’s overly abstract starting point. There are some hints even as early as Frei’s doctoral thesis about this future direction. “Biblical realism,” he observes, “aided Barth in the formulation of a concrete rather than formal notion of transcendence.”¹⁰² However, Frei is not yet at a

⁹⁹ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 504.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 542.

¹⁰¹ “Unsubstitutability” is a key concept of Frei’s, first coined in his 1966 essay, “Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus’ Death and Resurrection”, in Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 1–49, 11. It will be discussed in more detail towards the end of Chapter 3.

¹⁰² Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 490.

stage where he can write his own positive content of the human figure who was also the Word of God. He describes the Biblical Realism project, upon which Barth drew quite heavily, as “largely a preacher’s movement”, in that it has “no specifiable thought form” and “is apt to sound quite banal side by side with the subtleties of academic theology and philosophy”.¹⁰³ One might detect a similar worry in Frei, that any such project of his own would be open to the same accusations. There is even a hint of academic embarrassment at the need he perceives to tackle the biblical accounts from a ‘preacherly’ point of view, which will inevitably entail wrestling with such non-philosophical issues as the inspiration of scripture, and the rightness or otherwise of a ‘literal’ reading, with the danger always of “being misunderstood for a Fundamentalist”.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, if Frei intended to write a ‘content’ of the revelation that was Jesus Christ, then he was more than aware that he would be working within a very liberal tradition. The development of Higher Criticism had given rise to a number of very earnest 19th century attempts to write an historically-accurate ‘Life of Jesus’, not least of these being Schleiermacher’s own attempt.¹⁰⁵ That, however, had first of all been picked apart most effectively by Strauss in *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*¹⁰⁶ (1865); and then later, the whole trend had been subjected to Schweitzer’s razor critique.¹⁰⁷ This meant that such a project would be a dangerous undertaking indeed for a post-Barthian theologian. Nevertheless, as Frei came to see it, the problem with Schleiermacher’s account lay not in the undertaking itself, for the project was an honourable one. Rather, the problem lay in the inability of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics to deal adequately with the narrative form of the gospel accounts. If Frei could sort out the hermeneutical approach, then the project might once again be revived, and so offer an account of the content of Jesus Christ, who is the content of God’s self-revelation.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 501.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 503.

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁶ David Friedrich Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History: A Critique of Schleiermacher’s “The Life of Jesus”*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

¹⁰⁷ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, (London: A. & C. Black, 1910).

At this early stage Frei is still hopeful that Barth and Niebuhr, taken together, might somehow balance each other's weaknesses: Niebuhr's account of the meeting of Persons in the historical moment might perhaps counteract Barth's tendency to ontological abstraction. It seems that Frei had hopes of Niebuhr's particular brand of historical existentialism, that it might provide a "middle road" between the inviolable objectivism of both God and World which Barth had imported from the Kantian tradition:

Many theologians held that revelation, as unique act, becomes embodied in unique historical events. But in that case revelation seems to strike into history as a foreign element.... In this situation there may be promise in the endeavour to find a middle road between unrevelational history and unhistorical revelation, by stipulating two types of history, be they called secular and sacred or objective and existential.¹⁰⁸

However, in the course of the subsequent decade, Frei was to become increasingly dissatisfied with Niebuhr's account of "two types of history", which seemed to him to posit a separation between 'inner' and 'outer' which is unjustifiable, whether with reference to history, to text, to identity, or to God's being and revelation. His discovery of Auerbach's *Mimesis*¹⁰⁹, with its gripping account of the development of the Judaeo-Christian tradition of realistic narrative, was to provide Frei with one way around this dialectic. Following from that, his reading of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*¹¹⁰, with its devastating critique of existentialist assumptions, provided him with another means of critiquing 'inner' and 'outer' as false dichotomies.

This long rumination on the problem of the content of God ultimately comes to a head for Frei, with the side-by-side publications of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* in 1974, and *The Identity of Jesus Christ* in 1975. In the first of these twin publications, Frei sets out to explore a more satisfactory account of textual meaning, in which the 'real' content of the Bible is not hidden somewhere behind the narrative, but is in fact constituted precisely by these externally-narrated happenings. In related

¹⁰⁸ Frei, "Religion (Natural and Revealed)", 321.

¹⁰⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹¹⁰ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000).

fashion, in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, he explores how a person's identity is neither an 'inner' nor a 'transcendent' thing, but is constituted precisely by their 'external' words and deeds. When these two approaches together are applied to the story of Jesus as narrated in the gospels, we have the beginnings of a 'doctrine' of revelation as worked out by Frei: one which he hopes will avoid the problem of abstraction, and will instead give a satisfactory answer to his early question about the content of God. But before that can happen, Frei has to do some untangling of the three strands of logic that constitute the theo-logical enterprise: ontological, epistemological, and grammatical. Only then can he establish his own starting point for the logic of belief.

Chapter 2 The Logic of Belief

1. 'Prolegomena'

1.1 A Starting Point for Theology

In the previous chapter the focus was Frei's hunt through his theological predecessors for a doctrine of revelation which could provide some positive content to the concept of God. There it was observed that, if the dialectical revolution was right to reject subjective relationalism as the source of our knowledge of God, then scripture remains the only objective source of 'information' about God's actions in history. Frei's insight is that the task of listening to the revelation of God – always a hermeneutical issue, as Schleiermacher rightly identified – now becomes the specific task of the right reading of scripture. In other words, biblical hermeneutics has taken up the grammatical position of the starting point for the theological enterprise, displacing the existential encounter, the consciousness of God, and even Barthian-style ontology. Scripture, and not some pre-conceived 'doctrine' of revelation, must become for us the foundation and starting point for all theology, including the doctrine of revelation itself. In other words, Frei's contention is that we cannot even say that God has spoken, until we can say, *this* God has spoken, this specific, identifiable, content-full God.

The positing of biblical hermeneutics as foundational to theology is not to be confused with 'foundationalism'. 'Foundationalism' refers to the practice of theologians from the Enlightenment onwards of establishing a philosophical basis for theology in the form of a 'prolegomena'. For 'prolegomena', Robert Jenson's definition will suffice:

In the modern period it has often been supposed that the prolegomena to theology must enable the enterprise, that the axioms and warrants needed to set specifically theological cognition in motion must be antecedently established."¹

As Frei outlines in *Types of Christian Theology*, the intent of a prolegomena was to fix the theological method according to a theory of rationality or interpretation drawn

¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: The Triune God*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

from *outside* theology, perhaps in philosophy or in anthropology. Frei explains the reasoning thus:

Philosophy may be regarded as being a foundational discipline which, rather than giving us information, provides us with the criteria for meaning and certainty, coherence as well as truth, in any area of human reflection. In other words, the rules of correct thought are invariant and all-fields-encompassing. In the light of its foundational status, philosophy arbitrates what may at any time and anywhere count as meaningful language, genuine thought, and real knowledge.²

Even Schleiermacher, who argued so convincingly that theology had its own internal logic, nevertheless founded the system of *The Christian Faith* on the anthropological principle of the “feeling of absolute dependence”³ in all humanity. However, with the advent of Barth, such a modernist approach to theology became highly suspect. As Dan Stiver points out, from a ‘postmodern’ (or ‘postliberal’) perspective, the whole idea of a prolegomena in the foundational sense has become untenable:

At the fading of modernity, it has become clear in theology that methodology, or, as it is often technically called, prolegomena, was central to its assumptions. As many have pointed out, modernity generally relied on a secure foundation and then a secure method to build on to the foundation – at least that was the goal. Postmodernism is the result of repeated failure to achieve such a lofty ideal.⁴

Barth’s point is, that theology is not only an internal church discipline, but that it is founded on and accountable only to God.⁵ As such, there can be no universal philosophical method which can be applied to the task from ‘outside’. Rather, theological method must be derived from the task itself, as something that is always *ad hoc*, provisional, and subject to God’s judgement. Accordingly, although the term ‘prolegomena’, has survived into the post-Barth era, it now has a much more chastened definition. Robert Jenson’s is typical: “The most prolegomena to theology can appropriately do is provide readers with an advance description of the enterprise.”⁶

² Frei, *Types*, 20.

³ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 16. The concept is discussed in detail in Chapter 1/4, 12–18.

⁴ Stiver, “Theological Method”, 170.

⁵ “Theology is a function of the Church ... But as it confesses God, the Church also confesses both the humanity and the responsibility of its action ... it realises that it must give an account to God for the way in which it speaks.” Barth, CD I/1, 3.

⁶ Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*, 3.

So when we state that, in Frei's view, biblical hermeneutics are foundational to the theological enterprise, this is simply to say that they are the starting point for theology, derived not from outside but from within the faith-discourse itself. Frei's hope is that the right reading of scripture will provide the *content* of the God-who-has-spoken, on the basis of which he then might proceed to a doctrine of revelation and to further theologising. Of course, this entertains the possibility that scripture will not and cannot do this – and if so, then the risk Frei is taking is that theology has no foundation whatsoever, and is as meaningless an abstraction as the God after which it gropes.

However, what Frei is attempting is a kind of *pre*-theology: his intention is to establish the starting point for theology, and not to construct an explanatory system in itself. At this point, it is important to note that Frei has no pre-conceived doctrine of the authority of scripture, and does not begin with an understanding of the Bible as the Word of God – for that in itself would be to posit a doctrine of revelation *before* the actual reading of scripture. Rather, if any aspect of the three-fold Word⁷ is to be identified as revelation, whether that be scripture, Jesus Christ himself, or the act of proclamation, or even some other such construal, then that conclusion must arise out of the scriptural accounts, and not be imposed upon them.

What we have then, alongside his search for a concrete content to the doctrine of God, is Frei's growing awareness that where a theological scheme has failed to provide such a content, it is because it has in some sense started in the wrong place. Therefore his task, as he understands it, is to work out what is the correct starting point in what he terms sometimes "the order" and sometimes "the logic of belief".⁸ His mature theological project, climaxing in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, is to examine whether scripture can indeed provide that starting point, if it read according to a hermeneutic which is responsive to the demands of the text.

⁷ Barth considers "The Word of God in its Threefold Form" in *CDI/I*, 88–124.

⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 58.

1.2. Preface to *The Identity of Jesus Christ*: Frei's Hermeneutical Agenda

When Frei published *The Identity of Jesus Christ* in 1975, it was with the accompaniment of a 'Preface' in which he sets out very usefully his theological and hermeneutical agenda. This preface had been many years in the making. In 1966, Frei had published "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection"⁹, a long essay which was later largely reworked to become *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. The preface shows evidence of much reflection on responses to that essay, whether favourable, hostile, or plain uncomprehending. Furthermore, Frei's long hermeneutical project, finally published in 1974 as *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, had honed his ideas on the topic: while that book is a largely negative critique of the theories and methods of various 18th and 19th century hermeneutists, it is not possible to conduct such a critique without developing a positive standpoint of one's own. With this preface, Frei is now in a position to make an explicit statement of the hermeneutical principles which he himself employed in the course of the theological 'experiment' which was to become *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. As such, this preface is almost unique in Frei's output¹⁰, which on the whole tends to concentrate on dissecting the hermeneutics of others, leaving the reader to read between the lines for Frei's own preferences.

⁹ Hans W. Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection", *Christian Scholar* 49.4 (Winter), 263–306. This essay was republished in Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 45–93, and also in Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 1–49.

Frei twice reworked the original essay in longer forms in 1967. The first of these was "The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ", in *Crossroads: An Adult Education Magazine of the Presbyterian Church* 17.2 (Jan-Mar), 69–96; 17.3 (Apr-Jun), 69–96. This version later became *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, with the addition of the Preface and an Epilogue. On this earlier publication, Mike Higton remarks, "The differences between it and [*Identity*] are nearly all cosmetic. The final chapter adds a significant pneumatological, ecclesiological and political reflection to the argument of ['Theological Reflections']."

See Mike Higton's homepage, <http://people.exeter.ac.uk/mahigton/frei/bib2.html#bib>

The second of these re-workings appeared as "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal", in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 26–44.

¹⁰ The only comparable work is the 1983 paper, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 117–52.

In many ways, the purpose of this preface is to identify those hermeneutical schemes which Frei has in fact rejected. Hence, it largely takes the form of an argument *against* Neo-Orthodoxy, *against* apologetics, *against* a spiritual hermeneutic, and *against* any kind of systematic application to the Christian life of the religious significance of scripture. As with an earlier preface, that by Karl Barth to the second edition of *Der Römerbrief*, Frei is likewise struggling to explain himself in the face of the current dominant hermeneutical approach; and moreover, to do so without adopting its vocabulary and accompanying set of assumptions. As such, there is a sometimes belligerent tone as he rejects first one hermeneutical assumption and then another; a tone which alternates with a cautious insistence on the theological limitations of his own enterprise. Nevertheless, seventeen years after the publication of “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, it is clear that Frei has resolved many of his uncertainty as regards the various doctrines of revelation available to him, so that what we have here in this preface is a cogent and positive statement of Frei’s mature theological hermeneutics.

For all that we must examine what Frei rejects, the intention is to illustrate also what he accepts: what is in fact his conception of the task, form, and method(s) of biblical hermeneutics. A particular focus will be on Frei’s critical engagement with the hermeneutics of Karl Barth, and some comparison of the two will demonstrate where he accepts or assumes Barthian principles, and where he questions or even rejects them. In doing so, the hope is to describe Frei’s understanding of the importance of the “logic of belief” – in other words, to describe what he envisages is the correct starting point for the task of doing dogmatic theology and, once this is established, the correct order in which to proceed. Only on that basis will we then be able to return, in Chapter 3 and beyond, to the application of his hermeneutical principles to scripture, and his final arrival at a doctrine of revelation which does justice to the content of God.

2. A Theological Experiment: Testing the Hypothesis

Hermeneutics I define in the old-fashioned, rather narrow, and low-keyed manner as the rules and principles for determining the sense of written texts, or the rules and principles governing exegesis.¹¹

The publication in 1974 of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* was in effect an exercise in ‘clearing the decks’ of Frei’s liberal hermeneutical heritage. The preface to *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, published the following year, extends this ‘clearing’ into the contemporary theological scene: a scene which was dominated by the twin dialectical theologies of Karl Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy. An earlier attempt to explore his ideas had resulted in what Frei now sees as a partial failure: he references specifically “The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ”, which had successfully demonstrated the necessary co-positing of Jesus’ identity and presence, but at the expense, Frei judges, of leaving the way open to a subjectivist interpretation. Now he realises that not only must he excise what he can of his previous ‘existentialist’ vocabulary and conceptuality, but for the sake of preventing misinterpretation of what necessarily remains, realises also that he must accompany this re-presentation with a preface setting out the assumptions which underpin his enterprise.

Accordingly, Frei begins his preface with a description of the process of thought that went into “The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ”. It was, he claims, a “theological experiment”, and as such had left room for correction and clarification without necessarily undermining the central thesis. Not only had he struggled to give “precise form” to the “basic conviction” which provided the foundational hypothesis for his argument, but that argument itself had a “certain tentative character” in that he was not working with a “preexistent intellectual map”, but was developing his thinking only “in the process of writing”.¹² This modest assertion rather disingenuously conceals a deliberate approach which Frei developed when writing his doctoral thesis that theology should avoid any and all “preexistent” systematic schemes, and should rightly be done on an *ad hoc* basis (of which more discussion later).

¹¹ Frei, *Identity*, 61.

¹² *Ibid.* 53.

“The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ” was an “experiment” also in a second sense, in that its purpose was to test (not to ‘prove’, except in the old sense of the word) the “basic conviction”, or hypothesis, upon which he had founded his enterprise. This ‘testing’ was done by means of an exegesis of the gospel stories. Later in this chapter I shall return to the very Barthian principle of the practice of exegesis being the test of any theological theory. But for the moment let the focus be on this “basic conviction”, which Frei states as follows:

... that Christian faith involves a unique affirmation about Jesus Christ, viz., not only that he is the presence of God but also that knowing his identity is identical with having him present or being in his presence.¹³

It is important to be clear that Frei has not pulled this hypothesis out of thin air, nor yet is there any pretence that he has discovered it by means of a purely neutral hermeneutic. It is true that Frei is anxious to find a hermeneutic that will not “overwhelm”¹⁴ the narrative, but which will allow scripture to speak in its own terms. However, he is quite able to answer Gadamer’s warning, that “the literary and hermeneutical principle of understanding texts in their own terms is ... itself unsatisfactory and always in need of support from a generally unacknowledged dogmatic guideline”.¹⁵ Here Frei has quite clearly acknowledged his own “dogmatic guideline”, which is the affirmation that the Christian church has traditionally made concerning Jesus as the revelation of God, at which conclusion it has arrived through the reading of the gospels. This is entirely in keeping with the principle of theology being an internal church discipline.

However, it should be noted that, while the “basic conviction” *precedes* the reading of the text in strictly grammatical terms, in actuality, such a hypothesis is formed *in* and *with* a reading of that text. In other words, we have a simultaneity which nevertheless we are obliged to express in a grammatically sequential form. This is not so difficult a concept as it first appears. In science, it is an axiom that the nature of the object under scrutiny dictates the nature of the hypothesis, so that the hypothesis is not devised in an epistemological vacuum, but is formulated according

¹³ Frei, *Identity*, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 62.

¹⁵ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), 176. Frei relied heavily on Gadamer in the course of *Eclipse*, particularly in the last chapters on Schleiermacher.

to some degree of *a priori* knowledge of the object. Indeed, there is a logical ‘first reading’ somewhere which has formed all future hypotheses in the course of that reading. Similarly, Frei’s “basic conviction” has been formulated according to some *a priori* knowledge of the gospel narratives. However, likewise, there is a logical ‘first reading’ of the gospels somewhere, and it is hypothetically possible that such a first reading might occur again, perhaps as conducted by someone from an entirely non-Western and non-Christian culture. In such a case, a whole range of hypotheses regarding who Jesus is and what he is like would be formulated in and with that first reading. The logic of belief must therefore *begin* with a “basic conviction”, but this grammatically simple starting point does not necessarily correspond directly to a complex ‘in-and-with’ reality.

Some contrast with Barth is instructive. For Barth, at least up to and including the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*, his ‘prolegomena’ (as opposed to Frei’s “basic conviction”) is the considerably more succinct *Deus dixit*.¹⁶ Barth’s theology proceeds on the assumption that God has spoken and has revealed Godself, so that theology is always a ‘thinking after’ that event. So while Barth might examine critically every aspect of Christian dogmatics, he does so always in the light of that foundational event; but the event itself, the ‘God has spoken’, is unexamined. It cannot be examined. It is the point on which everything else is predicated; or perhaps it is better understood as a totality, the all-encompassing whole on which there is no external viewpoint. *Deus dixit* is how the universe began: the theologian, actually as well as logically, can do no more than think after the event that is God’s Word.

Frei begins his own logic of belief in a rather different place. For him, the prolegomena that ‘God has spoken’ posits the very necessary, and indeed *previous* question, *But who, then, is God?* This was his concern back in “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”: that this foundational assumption of Barth’s, entirely logical though it is, yet lacks *content*. It is significant that Frei does not even use the word, ‘prolegomena’ for his own starting point. By contrast, his “basic conviction” has a

¹⁶ As was pointed out in Chapter 1, this prolegomena later became far more unambiguously christological. See 36n.17.

considerably more tentative character: it is not an *a priori* truth, but a hypothesis to be tested. So where Barth begins with ‘God has spoken’ Frei turns this in to a hypothesis, that *if* God can be said to have spoken, *then* that can be posited only as God has or has not done so in the specific Word that is Jesus Christ. Furthermore, if God can be conceived as continuing to speak or to reveal – if God can be conceived as being present to us in our time – then that presence must likewise be conceived as the presence of Jesus Christ. This outlaws Niebuhr’s insistence that only God is present in the moment of revelation. Quite the contrary: if we seek ‘content’ to flesh out the abstract concept (however ontologically ‘actual’ God might be), then we can seek it only in the gospel accounts of Jesus Christ. Therefore, to answer the question, *Who, then, is God?*, we need only ask, *Who, then, is Jesus of Nazareth?* Once we know who this Jesus is, only then will we be able to say with confidence, that it is *this God* who is speaking.

In effect, then, where Barth posits as his prolegomena an ontology of an abstract being who ‘has spoken’, and only subsequently ‘fills in’ the content through biblical exegesis, Frei reverses the procedure: first we must know the content, the identity of God through exegesis, and only then can we say with ontological confidence that it is *this God* who has spoken and continues to speak. Of course, this ordering is merely a logical, grammatical ordering, appropriate to the theological task, and says nothing about any ontological dependence of God’s being upon God’s acts. Nor, for that matter, does Barth’s ordering say anything about an ontological independence of God’s being from God’s acts. Naturally, we cannot speak of God’s being but that God has revealed in act; although equally, we cannot speak of God’s self-revealing acts without speaking of God’s being.

Nevertheless, despite such simultaneity of ontology and epistemology, the theologian’s grammatical decisions remain vitally important. It is for just such grammatical reasons that Frei does not allow himself the easy option of adopting Barth’s prolegomena: for Frei, a ‘being who acts’ simply cannot be an *a priori* hermeneutical assumption. After all, from where else did Barth derive his conviction that God has spoken but from scripture, given that he himself had outlawed natural theology and immanent revelation? Rather, that God is a being who reveals is a conviction of faith, which is derived simultaneously *with* the reading of God’s story

in scripture, and as a theological concept grammatically can only be formulated *a posteriori*, that is, *after* its reading. But logically, what the theologian absolutely cannot do is posit the ‘existence’ of a revealing God *in advance* of exegesis.

This may explain why Frei opts for a “basic conviction” as opposed to a prolegomena. His “basic conviction” that Jesus Christ is the presence of God, as derived from the faith community, dictates his particular approach to the theological task of establishing the content of God. In other words, if his basic conviction is correct, that Jesus’ identity is identical with God’s presence, then it follows logically that to know who Jesus is to know who God is. Frei’s hermeneutical task is then clear: how ‘correctly’ to read the gospels in order to know the ‘content’ or identity of Jesus, and thus through exegesis to test the hypothesis, that Jesus is the presence of God. If he is indeed to be thought of as such, then the gospel accounts must provide the basis for that conclusion, demonstrating this co-identity to the point that Frei’s hypothesis can be upheld. This is how Frei proposes, by means of exegesis, to make ‘concrete’ the content of God.

Furthermore, if the second part of Frei’s “basic conviction” is correct, that “knowing his identity is identical with having him present”, then knowledge of Jesus’ historical identity will allow us to speak of God’s revelation to us in our existential present. In other words, the hermeneutical task is also to see if the gospel narratives can be read in such a way as to provide a satisfactory doctrine of revelation. By using a correlative ‘if ... then ...’ formulation, Frei is speaking in terms of logical, not actual, necessity: *if* we can read the gospels according to an adequate hermeneutic, *then* what should result is an account of the identity of historical Jesus of Nazareth which will not only provide concrete knowledge of God, but will also allow us also to speak of the presence of Jesus to us now. In a reverse move, this identity account then becomes the ‘proof’ of the chosen hermeneutic: *if* we have achieved such an account of the identity and presence of Jesus Christ, *then* our hermeneutic is patently adequate.

That the Christian’s experience of God’s presence might follow an entirely different order in actuality is besides the point. Frei’s insistence on the correct order for doing

theology is not intended to systematise the experience of coming to faith. Once again, he is following a grammatical order and not an actual one: it is simply that, given that we cannot say two things at once, the question then becomes, in what order should we say them? But this issue of the order, or logic, of belief is more crucial than it might at first appear, for at stake is the personal reality of God. As Frei had demonstrated in his earlier examinations of the doctrine of revelation, to begin in the wrong place in the logic of belief *inevitably* leads to an abstract and contentless concept of God. Frei's project is to repair this theological rip evident in both liberal and existentialist theology, between God's being and God's revelation, or between ontology and epistemology. And he intends to do so by starting in the right place, with a hermeneutic chosen precisely because of its ability to give a concrete account of identity.

3. Ad Hoc Methodology

3.1 The Fixed Form of the Inquiry

In his preface, Frei reveals to us in advance, that his selected hermeneutical method for the exegetical testing of his hypothesis did in fact confirm its basic truth. But further even than that confirmation, his gospel exegesis led him to an increased understanding of just how Jesus can be said to be God's revelation: this, he claims, is an understanding which was given to him *in and with* the reflective reading of the gospels, and not in advance of it. "It is of course true," he writes, "that we never really know what we think until we actually say it. In that sense the conviction just summarized gained force as the essay grew."¹⁷ This rather disingenuous statement concerning his own thought process conceals yet another confirmation of Frei's preferred *ad hoc* methodology.

But what is an *ad hoc* methodology? In order to reach a definition, it is necessary to do something with the idea of 'prolegomena' which Schleiermacher and his liberal cohorts did not do: to distinguish methodology from epistemology. Where Schleiermacher understood the foundational epistemological statement ("the feeling

¹⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 53.

of absolute dependence”) as a statement simultaneously of *method*, Frei refuses to systematise his own far weaker “basic conviction” with his chosen method. Rather, he aligns his “basic conviction” more closely with the *form* of his inquiry. The “basic conviction” is fixed, at least for the duration of the experiment. Meanwhile, in its own way, the form the experiment must take is equally fixed. Indeed, the form is fixed precisely by the nature of the ‘raw materials’ under examination, which in this case are the gospel narratives themselves. Frei’s “basic conviction”, which focuses the hermeneutical lens on the identity of Jesus Christ, means that he is trying to answer the formal questions, “Who is he?” and “What is he like?”¹⁸ These *formal* questions, derived in themselves through gospel exegesis, dictate that the *form* of Frei’s experiment must be descriptive and chronologically linear, coinciding with the realistic narrative form of the gospels.

At this point, Frei’s project begins to look worryingly similar to the kind of liberal theological project which Barth had been at such pains to escape. Barth’s own teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann, and his contemporary Adolf von Harnack, likewise sought to establish *who Jesus was*, beginning with the gospel accounts of the historical Jesus. Their project was to ‘uncover’ the true identity of Jesus through historical research and exegesis, in order to distinguish the “kernel” of truth from the “husk” of extraneous detail.¹⁹ Von Harnack believed that at least three ‘facts’ about Jesus could be established from the gospel accounts:

In the first place, they [the gospels] offer us a plain picture of Jesus’ teaching, in regard both to its main features and to its individual application; in the second place, they tell us how his life issued in the service of his vocation; and in the third place, they describe to us the impression which he made upon his disciples, and which they transmitted.²⁰

In other words, Jesus’ identity was constituted by his teachings, his obedience to God, and the ongoing impact of his personality. The similarities to Frei’s project are alarming. However, the similarity resides in the fixed *form* of the gospels. Try as they might, the 19th century liberals could not escape the gospels’ realistic narrative

¹⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 136.

¹⁹ This phrase was originally coined by the translator of Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Berlin, 1900), in reference to the essence of Christianity, and not to the identity of Jesus as such. “Husk” and “kernel” are the English translation of the German “*Schale*” and “*Kern*”. See Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1901), 12.

²⁰ Harnack, *What is Christianity?* 31.

form, and indeed, found it highly uncongenial to their own theological project, of locating the identity of Jesus Christ in his 'inner' consciousness or personality. This misreading – and the dogged resistance of the texts themselves – forms the core of Frei's critique in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.

The form, then, is fixed by the text, and the "basic conviction" is fixed by a project's particular aim, which likewise should be derived from the text, and not from some external principle. It is therefore only the method which can be described as *ad hoc*. Whenever the "basic conviction" changes, so that another hypothesis is being pursued, then the method will change again: what is needed to 'prove' one assertion regarding the gospels will not work to 'prove' another, even if the form of the inquiry must still be linear and descriptive. However, when the text itself changes, then so too must the form of the experiment: a chronologically linear and descriptive form would not be so appropriate to Paul's *Epistles*, for example. In short, there is no universal hermeneutical method which can be applied equally to all texts, so that such decisions must be made on an *ad hoc* basis.

3.2 The Theological Task

Methodology, therefore, must be *ad hoc* and flexible, because this is necessitated by the particularity of each hypothesis and the form of each text. However, there is a further component which feeds into the choice of method, and that is the issue of the current theological task. What that theological task might be can never be fixed, but is ever changing. This is because the theological task is the 'human' end of the search for the content of God, which 'thinks after' revelation and is itself neither revealed, nor inspired, nor canonically fixed. For Barth, the task was to counter liberal immanent understandings of revelation; for Frei, by contrast, the task is to counter existentialist dualism. In our time the task will have changed again. Therefore a key hermeneutical principle for Frei was to let the text-based *hypothesis* and *form* interact with the current theological task in order to dictate, on an *ad hoc* basis, the most appropriate and useful *method*.

Frei's 1956 doctoral thesis is instructive here. As Frei explains, Barth chose a violently dialectical method in *Der Römerbrief* for three principal reasons. The first reason is Barth's own "basic conviction", derived from Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* itself: the uncompromising dialectic of "God is in heaven, and thou art on earth". Barth explains how he "embarks" on the interpretation of *Romans* "on the assumption that he is confronted with the same unmistakable and immeasurable significance of that relation as I myself am confronted with, and that it is this situation which moulds his thought and its expression". In a clear parallel to Frei's own approach, Barth goes on to explain that "whether these assumptions are justified or not becomes clear in the course of the investigation".²¹

The second reason for Barth's choice of his dialectical method is that the form, or shape, of Paul's own argument in his *Letter to the Romans* is likewise dialectical, predicated on the freedom of God from the perceptions of humanity. There is no thought given by Barth here as to how this dialectical method might be applied to any other text, biblical or otherwise, according to some general hermeneutical principle.

Frei argues that the third reason Barth chose such a violent dialectical method was the current theological *task*. This Frei summarises as follows:

To point to the complete newness, the miracle of the grace and freedom of God – in contrast to the relational theologies of Liberalism et al. which always began with the givenness, the togetherness of God and man in the relation of revelation.²²

However, this intention in itself cannot be sharply distinguished from the preoccupations of his liberal teachers, who would have agreed quite happily that revelation can be termed 'miracle'. As Schleiermacher explained:

In one respect all Christian dogmas are supra-rational, in another they are all rational. They are supra-rational in the respect in which everything experienced is supra-rational. For there is an inner experience to which they may all be traced: they rest upon a *given* ... a true appropriation of Christian dogmas cannot be brought about by scientific means, and thus lies outside the realm of reason: it can only be brought about by each man willing to have the experience for himself.²³

²¹ Barth, *Romans*, 10.

²² Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 94.

²³ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 67.

This is the “givenness” to which Frei refers, that the term ‘revelation’ can appropriately be applied to any extraordinary insight which has defied the causal rationality of the external world and “cannot itself in turn be explained by the historical chain which precedes it”²⁴. What it does *not* refer to is a transcendent revelation: “any possibility of God being in any way given is entirely excluded,” Schleiermacher wrote, “because anything that is outwardly given must be given as an object exposed to our counter-influence, however slight that may be.”²⁵

The point to be made here is the immensity of Barth’s task. In order to accomplish it, he had to make it clear beyond all ambiguity that this was a doctrine of *krisis*. A method ill-suited to this task, even if it were otherwise appropriate to the text, might have allowed this eschatological hope to be interpreted along liberal lines as cultural progress or as some kind of ascent of man. Adolf von Harnack, for example, while differentiating sharply between “the progress of civilisation”²⁶ and the Kingdom of God, nevertheless understands the latter as providing spiritual meaning to the former:

Knowledge of God is the spring that is to fructify the barren field, and pour forth streams of living water ... the condition of all edification, and, we may also say, of all true growth and progress.²⁷

This same power to provide culture with its true *telos* was a theme of Julius Kaftan, in his case worked out with an even stronger futurist eschatological focus.²⁸ Barth, intent on separating humanity utterly from this cultural-religious source of hope, chose as his method “an idealistic dialectic in which the ‘end’ of time and hope is to be identified neither with trans-noetic experience, nor with cultural hope, but with a pure transcendence of every intuitable or knowable here and now in time.”²⁹ That is why Frei insists that Barth’s jaggedly fierce and uncompromising dialectic in *Der Römerbrief* should not be understood as an absolute method, appropriate in all times and places and applicable to all texts. Rather, it is the perfect example of an *ad hoc* method, selected according to the conjunction of a textually-derived “basic

²⁴ Ibid. 50.

²⁵ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 18.

²⁶ Harnack, *What is Christianity*, 124.

²⁷ Ibid. 125–6.

²⁸ See Julius Kaftan, *The Truth of the Christian Religion*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1894).

²⁹ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 94–5.

conviction”, the form of the biblical text under consideration, and a very specific theological task. In short, it was temporarily useful to Barth’s purpose.

Thus Frei illustrates how the dialectical method, thought by von Balthasar to be so intrinsic to Barth’s early theology, is in fact a highly utilitarian decision: it was useful to Barth at that place and time, and should not be read as his ultimate method, nor as his ultimate theological position. Frei coins the phrase “methodological agnosticism”³⁰ to sum up Barth’s preferred approach to methodology. As McCormack explains, method can never be absolute, for method must work always with a humbling awareness of its own failure to talk about God:

All methodological reflection stands in the shadow of a negative sign. Karl Barth certainly had a method (or better, methods). But it must be understood that method for him was nothing more than an emergency measure adopted in the face of a disaster – not unlike *ad hoc* laws adopted in times of national catastrophe.³¹

Barth’s innovation, and Frei’s insight, is that unlike form, method is easily substituted on an *ad hoc* basis, provided that it is not invested with too much theological or ontological significance *in itself*. Being of this world, method is an ever-shifting process: a promise, but no guarantee, of enlightenment.

3.3 Ontology and Theological Grammar: A Comparison with Jüngel’s Trinitarian Methodology

Interestingly – and instructively – around the same time period as Frei is writing, Jüngel is tackling the same questions in Trinitarian terms. The ‘form’ of the inquiry, he argues, is dictated entirely by the Trinitarian nature of the being of God:

The theological question concerning the being of God has been brought on to a path along which the being of God has *itself proceeded* and which thereby first of all was paved and made into a path ...The being of God is the hermeneutical problem of theology. More exactly: the fact that the being of God *proceeds* is precisely the hermeneutical problem. For only because the being of God proceeds is there an encounter between God and man. And

³⁰ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 465.

³¹ McCormack, *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 312. McCormack also argues that Barth’s perceived “turn to analogy” was nothing more than a *methodological* shift, and there was no such shift in the dialectical *form* of Barth’s theological argument, (nor indeed in the dialectical prolegomenal statement of God acting and speaking in absolute freedom and without precondition). While Frei reads the later Barth differently, this conclusion nevertheless fits well with his perception that method is not fixed as is form.

the hermeneutical problem is grounded precisely in this encounter between God and man which owes its origin to the movement of God's being.³²

In other words, God sets the terms of theological inquiry by revealing Godself as Trinitarian, so that the theologian's method must follow after. Hence, Jüngel argues, Barth's setting of the doctrine of the Trinity (Revealer, Revelation, Being Revealed) right at the start of his *Church Dogmatics* is "a hermeneutical decision of the greatest relevance"³³, for it is this revealed content of God which becomes the methodological key to all our other knowledge of God.

In other words, the old divide between epistemology and ontology is virtually irrelevant here. God's being-in-itself is in fact entirely contiguous with the epistemological event of God's 'becoming-for-us'; God's Trinitarian 'content' is identical with God's Trinitarian 'form' as revealed in an event "that does not let itself be distinguished into form and content".³⁴ While Jüngel admits that Barth himself never used the phrase "being in becoming"³⁵, he insists that this is an accurate paraphrase of Barth's oft-repeated point, that "God's word is identical with God himself".³⁶ Jüngel simply interprets "word" in the most dynamic terms possible – the event of "becoming". This is how he claims to avoid metaphysical speculation, even while writing about the being of God, for 'metaphysics' only occurs when the being of God is divorced from God's revelation. Therefore, far from being speculative, Jüngel contends that the dogma of the Trinity actually safeguards against metaphysics, because it is grounded in the action of God. And herein is the concrete content of God, as Jüngel extrapolates from Barth: "If we are able to formulate this self-giving of God in which he is ours as concrete event, then we must also formulate the being of God in the event of the self-relatedness of this being as *concrete* being."³⁷ It is a simple equation. The form and the content match. Epistemology is inseparable from ontology. If the (christological) event of revelation is concrete, then God is concrete.

³² Jüngel, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, xx–xxi.

³³ *Ibid.* 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 16.

³⁵ *Ibid.* viii.

³⁶ Barth, *CDI/1*, 304.

³⁷ Jüngel, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 30.

Here, however, something crucial must be stated. If the divide between epistemology and ontology is collapsed, then what Frei has realised is that the divide between ontology and grammar has been widened. Let us define our terms as follows: if ontology is equivalent to “content”, and epistemology has an equivalence to “form”, then grammatical logic – the order in which we say things – must be equated to method. As grammar, then, method is conceptual, not actual. Ontology – the nature of the object under consideration – should indeed be one of the considerations which dictates the chosen method, but it is not identical with that method. Thus the narrated identity of Jesus in the gospels forms part of the demand for a realistic narrative hermeneutic, but Frei does not allow the equation to work the other way: it is not the realistic narrative hermeneutic which tells Jesus of Nazareth who he is. Likewise, the absolute ontological freedom of God is certainly one of the key considerations which dictates Barth’s dialectical method, but this does not mean that the freedom of God can be read ‘back’ from the dialectical method. While it is always possible that they will coincide, ontology and grammar are not the same thing.

4. Frei and Revelation: Contra Neo-Orthodoxy

4.1 The Problem of the Category, ‘Presence’

The challenge posed by Frei’s “basic conviction” was to present an account of the absolute co-existence of the identity and presence of Jesus Christ; while his theological task was to do this without resorting to an ‘inner’, subjective account of revelation. He had attempted to do just that in “The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ”, but his preface to *Identity* makes it clear that he now judges that attempt as flawed. The problem, as he now sees it, is that the category of ‘presence’ remains too deeply wedded to a concept of ‘inner’ revelation. As such, he now states his regret at having resorted to such terminology at all:

Specifically, I would not now put nearly the same stress on ‘presence’ as a category. It is, among other things, deeply implicated in the twin dangers of a mystification and of loss of morality to religion which result from making personal acquaintance or personal knowledge the model for what transpires between God and man in religion or Christian faith. I agree with the recently emerged consensus among a good many theologians that ‘revelation’ is not a wholly unambiguous or satisfying central concept for stating what Christianity is all about.

Furthermore, the governing model for construing ‘revelation’ among modern Protestant theologians, that of a ‘non-propositional’ personal encounter, is even more problematical.³⁸

Frei does not identify his theological opponents directly here. Nevertheless, in its very knowing allusions to Christian existentialism, it is clear that he has Neo-Orthodoxy in his sights as his primary opponent. Yet at the same time, he acknowledges the real difficulty he has had in avoiding existentialist-style categories and vocabulary – just as he had earlier observed how Barth had struggled to find a new theological language when he had been “versed in relationalism”. Frei observes regarding his own quandary:

By elevating the word ‘presence,’ as I did, to the level of an indispensable systematic or technical concept governing theological analysis made me come at least within hailing distance of the tangles I have just mentioned.³⁹

Now he repudiates his earlier dependence on ‘existentialist’ terminology, while yet admitting that it remains almost impossible to avoid it altogether. For example, he describes how he had adopted a Bultmannian-style scheme when writing about gnosticism, taking “the dying-and-rising-Savior rhythm to be a mythological representation of human self-alienation and reconciliation”. While he now largely rejects this scheme, he explains this earlier ‘error’ on the grounds of “the prevalence in the interpretation of intellectual and cultural history of that same Idealistic-Existentialist conceptuality which then governed ‘revelation’ theology”.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the section still appears in *Identity*, albeit in a slightly changed form.⁴¹

More problematically, Frei now has additional doubts as to the suitability of one of his technical categories for identity, that of “self-manifestation”:

I would want to be a little more tentative about the second, since it may suffer from some of the same genetic defects as the category ‘presence’.⁴²

He even goes as far as to say that if he were to rethink the whole project, he might now prefer to use sociological and Marxist categories: just as Idealism offered itself to Barth, Marxism now offers itself and its vocabulary as a scheme of thought which has the advantage of being clearly opposed to existentialism. While Frei never

³⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 53–4.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 54.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 55–6.

⁴¹ See Chapter 6, “Redeemed Redeemer in Myth and Gospel”, in Frei, *Identity*, 108–14.

⁴² Frei, *Identity*, 56.

actually followed this up, it is clear that he was still searching for a means of giving a more objective account of Jesus' identity and presence.

Ultimately, however, for all his theological and linguistic contortions, Frei recognises that in effect, his earlier essay used the category 'presence' rather in the same way that Barth used the category, 'Spirit':

In the end it came to the claim that the specifically Christian affirmation of the presence of God-in-Christ for the world involves nothing philosophically more high-flown than a doctrine of the Spirit ...⁴³

As a doctrine, therefore, the category can be allowed to stand, for it is not so much to be argued theologically, as to be affirmed by the faith community. Frei's criticism was that, rather than simply affirm the presence of Christ or the inspiration of the Spirit as Barth did, his theological opponents had attempted to use God's presence as yet another prolegomena, in the old sense: an "indispensable systematic or technical concept governing theological analysis".⁴⁴ In other words, they had built an entire theological edifice on a category that was too subjective and too philosophical to bear its weight:

It was Kant's transcendental ego, transformed into Idealist subjectivity or romantic consciousness, and heightened to the point of a unique perspective on self, others, and the universe at large.⁴⁵

By beginning with the category of God's presence to us – an 'inside faith', confessional category – the Neo-Orthodox theologians had imagined that they had escaped the old modernist prolegomenal bind. However, Frei perceives that they had, once again, and accidentally this time, begun with an abstraction, a concept without content. He is therefore understandably wary that he may have erred in the same direction. However, there is a crucial difference between Frei's account of presence and the Neo-Orthodox treatment. In effect, where Neo-Orthodoxy had built a theological system upon the category of presence, Frei had taken a step back in order to find the foundation for the claim to God's presence in the first place. In the grammatical order of belief, presence must come thereafter.

⁴³ Frei, *Identity*, 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

4.2 Frei's Criticism of Barth

Interestingly, although his 'actualistic' account of Jesus Christ as God's revelation is far from the existentialist scheme, Barth does not escape criticism here. For all that Frei was always and essentially Barthian in his theological preferences, he detects a lacuna in Barth's presentation of revelation which had allowed this "'non-propositional' personal encounter"⁴⁶ model to be established. In other words, there is a gap in Barth's theology which had left him vulnerable to existentialist misinterpretation: and that gap lies precisely in the overly abstract concept of the speaking God that is Barth's starting point. This criticism applies equally to Barth's later christological prolegomena, only this time the abstraction is 'Christ', who is at least *initially* posited without content.

Frei is not a naïve reader of Barth. He understands how Barth's account of revelation is thoroughly christological, and also how his very objective account of revelation is founded most firmly on biblical exegesis. Nevertheless, as Higton puts it expressively:

Frei considered, however, that although the technical machinery of this assertion was all in place and running like clockwork, there was nevertheless a hollow at its centre.⁴⁷

Frei's criticism is that by *beginning* with an account of a 'God' who simply 'has spoken', the very non-informative nature of Barth's prolegomenal statement means that there is in effect no content to revelation as it is construed *at the start*. In other words Barth, while asserting so strongly the actuality of God's revelation in Christ, had not paid sufficient attention to the man, Jesus of Nazareth. As Frei saw it, the result is that Barth struggles to hold together the two natures of Christ in one person, so that the divine is emphasised at the expense of the human:

For Barth, the tendency towards epistemological monophysitism and historical scepticism resulted in an uneasy balance in Christology ... For Barth the earlier tendency, at any rate, was for the historical nature and content of Jesus of Nazareth to diminish beside the objective reality of the eternal Word made flesh.⁴⁸

Accordingly, Frei reads Barth's account as depressingly abstract, far too close to his Idealist predecessors, so that Barth's approach could even be accused of

⁴⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 54.

⁴⁷ Higton, *Christ, Providence and History*, 6.

⁴⁸ Frei, "Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 111.

“epistemological monophysitism”, even if it is not monophysitism in actuality. Frei is even able to question even the supposed revolutionary nature of Barth’s initial break with liberalism:

This notion of ‘presence’ seemed to me to be the distillate of the philosophical conceptuality under which such otherwise very different people as Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and the dialectical theologians of the 1920s set forth their religious and theological proposals. In the light of this common conceptuality the very notion of revelation, which was supposed to represent a break with the sour theological grapes of the early 19th-century fathers, was no more than an instance of the dialectical children’s teeth being set on edge.⁴⁹

Should Barth be included in this condemnation? His name is not mentioned, but neither is he specifically excluded. If we do include him – and he certainly fits the “dialectical” category – then Frei’s conclusion is, that for all Barth’s success in overturning the liberal theological edifice, his philosophical inheritance is still apparent when it comes to the doctrine of revelation. Basically, Barth’s very actual and concrete notion of revelation, at least as set out in his early theology, is for Frei not actual *enough*, not concrete *enough* ... and this is precisely because it is posited at least grammatically (though not actually) *before* a reading of the gospels.

This Frei wants to remedy. His return in *Identity* to exegesis is an attempt at a ‘de-abstraction’ of the doctrine of revelation by grounding it in the scriptural witness. Thus Frei hopes to give the doctrine of God some actual content; or rather, he hopes to *begin* with the content – with *who God is* according to God’s own narrative – before even advancing to the doctrine. In the same way (as he later illustrates in *Identity*) that Jesus governs his own predicates, so the reality of God governs the conceptuality. Frei contends that the theologian can posit a ‘content’ to God through an exegetical reading of the gospels, precisely because to know Jesus’ identity is the same as to have him present, while to have Jesus present is just another way of saying that God is here. A study of the concrete identity of Jesus Christ as it is described in the gospels should go some way towards de-abstracting the doctrine of God.

However, Frei is distinctly wary of claiming revelation, even in Jesus Christ, as a starting point for the knowledge of God at all:

⁴⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 54–5.

If the cognate category of divine self-revelation were appropriate, one should say no more than that God-in-Christ could not be conceived as not revealing himself or not being revealed, even though this means neither that he must reveal himself (as Hegel claimed) nor that this is necessarily the most appropriate way to conceive of him.⁵⁰

The point is one of simple logic: “God-in-Christ” cannot be conceived as *not* revealing Godself, because simply to say “God-in-Christ” is *ipso facto* to posit revelation. The statement perhaps does not quite have the objective force of Anselm’s argument for the existence of God: the “being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived”.⁵¹ For Frei, it is merely a logical and grammatical bind, and nothing more.⁵² But then, so is Anselm’s argument. Often read as a statement about the actual being of God, it could equally be argued that Anselm’s ‘ontological proof’ is neither ontological, nor a proof. Rather, it functions primarily as a regulative concept: to say that God is the “being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived” is *ipso facto* to posit God, which makes it a logical statement and not an ontological one. As Frei points out, just because “God-in-Christ” can be formulated conceptually, this does not lend the concept any reality. Once again we repeat the point: ontology may dictate grammar, but grammar cannot dictate ontology. The equation cannot be reversed. God is not bound by the limits of our language.

Frei contends that his ‘Anselmic’ formula is as far as the concept of God’s self-revelation should go as a “cognate category” – and it may not be appropriate to go even that far. *Of course* God could not be conceived of at all, had God not first of all spoken. *Of course* one must posit revelation before one begins to theologise. However, this cannot be a starting point for theology except in the baldest of senses – it is a point of grammatical logic, and *no more*. Frei, therefore, confines himself to saying this:

*If one thinks about him [Jesus] under this rubric one cannot conceive of him as not being present. Further than that I would not go.*⁵³

⁵⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 55.

⁵¹ See Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion: with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 99.

⁵² “Where Anselm asks us to consider the identity of God, the ‘being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived’, Frei asks us to consider the identity of the risen Jesus, the ‘one-who-cannot-be-thought-of-except-as-present’.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 163.

⁵³ Frei, *Identity*, 55.

Therefore, to use revelation as a “cognate category”, that is, a category which provides one with actual *knowledge* of God, is to go further than the grammar will allow. All the doctrine of revelation can provide for epistemology/ontology is its basis – and, simultaneously, its outer limits, that we can say nothing beyond what has been revealed. But as to *content*, the category is an abstraction, and in itself can provide no knowledge of God. To conjecture any further as to the being of God predicated on this baldest of grammatical statements is to stray off the narrow path of theology and down the wide blind alley of human experience, precisely because the abstraction of God leaves us nowhere else to go. That is why, in Frei’s view, far too much had been built by the Neo-Orthodox movement in particular upon this very empty, content-lite notion of revelation.

In short, to begin with revelation is to admit that revelation *has not revealed anything*. That Barth himself avoided this existentialist trap is owing to his awareness of the difference between grammar and ontology/epistemology:

We must now follow another order if we are to see how biblical revelation and the doctrine of the Trinity are interconnected, how the second could and did proceed out of the first ... Historically considered and stated the three questions answered in the Bible, that of revealed, revelation and being revealed, do not have the same importance. The true theme of the biblical witness is the second of the concepts, God’s action in his revelation ... and therefore the predicate in our statement.⁵⁴

In what Frei interpreted as a growing awareness of the limits of the dialectical method, Barth later moved to a much more biblically-grounded and actualistic christological starting point. But the stated prolegomena of *deus dixit*, which was his logical starting point merely, became the logical *and* the actual starting point for the subsequent generation of existential theologians. The impossibility of objective knowledge of God in this scheme inevitably threw such theologians back onto the subjective knowledge of God. In this way, the personal existential encounter with God became the new revelation event, and hence the very shaky foundation for Neo-Orthodox theology.

⁵⁴ Barth, *CDI/I*, 314–15.

5. Non-Apologetic Theology

5.1 The Order of Belief

Frei's opposition to Neo-Orthodoxy is apparent also in his understanding of the function of theology. Crudely differentiated, theology can be seen as having two potential aims. The first is to serve the Christian community by describing conceptually in doctrinal form its beliefs and experiences: in other words, to do theology from an 'inside faith' perspective. The second mode of viewing theology is that its essential function is to persuade the non-believer of the inherent rationality of the Christian faith. However, there are of course those who have never heard the story of Jesus, or who do not understand his role in God's saving history. Therefore, if this second function of theology is to persuade the rational non-believer (this function relies on a concept of a shared rationality as opposed to a shared faith), then it necessitates a kind of 'translation' of 'inside faith' beliefs and experiences into a 'outside faith' language.

The first type of theology, then, is essentially propositional and descriptive; the second could be termed apologetic and missional, where the purpose of theology is to lead a person *up to* the moment of faith, after which Christian experience and practice can take over. As such, the two types have very little in common, and nor can they easily exist side by side in a theological scheme. As Frei observes, "The order of belief is logically a totally different matter from that of coming to believe".⁵⁵ Frei perceives also how the task of apologetics can be further sub-divided. The first sub-division – to argue the inherent rationality of faith from evidence – is in fact the more easily dismissed: Schleiermacher had done a good job back at the beginning of the 19th century, when he had contended that, in epistemological terms, religion was a special case.⁵⁶ Thus Schleiermacher in a sense created the second sub-division, when he fenced revelation off from scientific critique by transferring it across into

⁵⁵ Frei, *Identity*, 58.

⁵⁶ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially the Second Speech.

the subjective God-consciousness. As a result, the function of theology now became to explain where God might be located in the individual's inner life.

In Frei's time, the Neo-Orthodox theologians had their own perspective on the task of theology. Like Schleiermacher, they viewed the function of theology as apologetic in this second sense, so that they were similarly impatient both with systematic doctrinal formulations about God, and with anything approaching metaphysics. Much as Frei shared this dislike of metaphysics, which had passed from 19th to 20th century theology almost unscathed, this alternative 'apologetic' focus made him nervous. In this respect, it is worth noting his careful delineation of the task of theology in an earlier essay:

I should want to draw a sharp distinction between the logical structure as well as the content of Christian belief, which it is the business of theologians to describe but not to explain or argue, and the totally different logic of *how one comes* to believe, or the possibility of believing immanent in human existence, on which the theologian has relatively little to say and on which he should in any case not base the structure of his theology.⁵⁷

However, this distinction was not recognised by the Neo-Orthodox school. *They* were not nervous about apologetics; on the contrary, apologetics was the whole purpose of theology. They had learned from Schleiermacher, *via* Barth, that theology could only really be done from an 'inside faith' perspective. As we have seen, Frei himself is in accordance with this. But at the same time, Frei detects a problem with this perspective. The problem is hermeneutical, and it lies in the following statement:

There are those who claim that Christianity, whatever its professed beliefs, is accessible as a viable possibility only as one learns to dispose oneself in a distinctively Christian way.⁵⁸

This learning of a "distinctively Christian way" – of a 'faith-perspective' – means that achieving faith becomes the vital theological point, with the result that theology becomes all about the human journey to that point where our story and God's might coincide. The problem with this formulation is that revelation is then logically restricted by the faith or unfaith of the recipients, *even before it is given*. In other

⁵⁷ Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal", 30. This paper was first delivered at Harvard Divinity School in December 1967.

⁵⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 57.

words, God cannot reveal to us until we have achieved by some effort of our own enough faith finally to receive revelation.

By contrast, Frei's particular 'inside faith' perspective does not mean that one must find one's faith *before* one can do theology: if revelation occurs, or has occurred, then the principle of God's freedom can tolerate no preconditions. By the same token, faith cannot be a precondition to the right understanding of the Bible, so that the idea of a 'faith hermeneutic' is outlawed. Rather, Frei's 'inside faith' perspective means for him, that a theological hypothesis requires a suspension of judgement as to its truth until it has been hermeneutically tested through biblical exegesis. That this hypothesis is derived from the faith-community, who in their turn have derived it from their reading of that same scripture, is what makes it an 'inside faith' perspective; that it need not be believed before (or even after) exegetical testing, is what makes it less than a faith hermeneutic. In short, what one needs before one can do theology is not faith, nor yet revelation, but merely a hypothesis and a Bible. Of course, from the perspective of faith, revelation has already occurred: there could be no inquiry after the knowledge of God if God had not spoken. But as demonstrated above, revelation in that case is so axiomatic, so grammatically necessary for the task of theology, that it barely needs consideration. Rather, believer and non-believer alike are obliged to begin with the objective scriptural account of the identity and content of God in Jesus Christ. Faith, if it comes at all, comes *after*.

5.2 Barth's 'Faith Hermeneutic' and the Existentialist Problem

It is at this crucial point regarding the necessity or otherwise of a faith hermeneutic, that Frei once again comes into conflict with Barth. Barth wrote little directly about hermeneutics, preferring (as Frei had noted) the practice of exegesis to the theory. Indeed, Barth has been accused of actual hostility to hermeneutics, associated as it was with the 'rival' theology of Rudolf Bultmann.⁵⁹ Despite such hostility, Mark Wallace remarks how "there is a grain of truth in these evaluations insofar as Barth

⁵⁹ See, for example, Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

would probably have scoffed at labelling his thought “hermeneutical””.⁶⁰ However, from that practice, and from scattered observations, it is possible to construct an account of Barth’s hermeneutical approach: a task which has been undertaken in recent theology most notably by Bruce McCormack, and by Richard E. Burnett.⁶¹

In a 1991 essay, “Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest”, McCormack describes Barth’s hermeneutics as “a hermeneutical edifice with three stages”⁶². The “first stage of the enterprise” he identifies as “to establish what stands in the text”⁶³, that is, to use a historical-critical method to make the plain sense of the scripture as clear as possible. From this first reading, “some provisional understanding of what the text is about may be formed”, which then becomes a “kind of working hypothesis”⁶⁴, as in Frei’s “basic conviction”. This “working hypothesis” then both informs the subsequent exegesis, and is tested by it. So far Frei would be almost entirely in agreement.

The second stage of Barth’s biblical hermeneutic “consists in penetrating through the text to the mystery which lies concealed within”⁶⁵. The aim is to catch the same glimpse of God as did the biblical writer, as if one were standing exactly alongside him. In such a way the revealed Word of God might be discerned in, through, and beyond the mere ‘words’ of scripture. In his Preface to *Der Römerbrief*, Barth writes:

When an investigation is rightly conducted, boulders composed of fortuitous or incidental or merely historical conceptions ought to disappear almost entirely. The Word ought to be exposed in the words. Intelligent comment means that I am driven on till I stand with nothing before me but the enigma of the matter; till the document seems hardly to exist as a

⁶⁰ Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naïveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1990), 2.

⁶¹ See Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

⁶² Bruce L. McCormack, “Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest”, in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on His Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 322–38.

⁶³ McCormack, “Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest”, 327.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

document; till I have almost forgotten that I am not its author; till I know the author so well that I allow him to speak in my name and am even able to speak in his name myself.⁶⁶

In other words, as McCormack explains, Barth considers that he has only understood the text when he has glimpsed *through* the text the same “Subject-matter” as did Paul in his time. Any reader, believing or otherwise, can read the text as being ‘about God’ in the baldest sense: yet as Barth explains in *Church Dogmatics 1/2*, this is no revelation as such until an actual glimpse of the God *beyond* the text has been given:

... [I]n the face of this subject-matter there can be no question of our achieving, as we do in others, the confident approach which masters and subdues the matter. It is rather a question of our being gripped by the subject-matter – not gripped physically, not making an experience out of it and the like, although (ironically!) that can happen – but really gripped, so that it is only as those who are mastered by the subject-matter, who are subdued by it, that we can investigate the humanity of the word by which it is told us.⁶⁷

This “gripping” can be no more than a glimpse of the subject matter – God is not so readily available to us even in scripture, and revelation is no possession of the text or of our hermeneutic. Yet this glimpse is a genuine encounter, a true revelation to faith in which, simultaneously, the gift of faith is given.

The third stage of Barth’s hermeneutical method involves returning to the text and attempting now “to understand it anew, this time in the light of the subject matter”.⁶⁸ This involves a grammatical and doctrinal restating of the text in one’s own words, but with one’s understanding now filtered through this revelatory glimpse of the subject matter. In other words, what we have at last is a ‘faith hermeneutic’. McCormack judges that “the hardest step in this interpretative process is the second one”, given that “to penetrate to the subject matter is ... a human impossibility”⁶⁹, and something well beyond the power of the exegete. However, in another sense, this second stage is the easiest stage of all, precisely because it does not lie in the hands of the human reader of scripture, and cannot be manufactured either by the most devout or by the most academically rigorous approach. Either God reveals or God does not. But unless this revealing takes place, then the third ‘doctrinal’ stage is an absolute impossibility. After all, Stage 1 in Barth’s “hermeneutical edifice” is an enterprise which can be undertaken by anyone regardless of faith-stance, while the

⁶⁶ Barth, *Romans*, 8.

⁶⁷ Barth, *CDI/2*, 470.

⁶⁸ McCormack, “Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest”, 328.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 329.

insight given at Stage 2 could at God's discretion potentially be given to any reader, regardless of their previous faith or unbelief. However, Stage 3 can be done only by a person of faith; and moreover, it is only now that the Bible is finally being read with an adequate hermeneutic. For Barth, the biblical text simply cannot be understood by a non-believer. Although Barth and the Neo-Orthodox school differ profoundly in their understanding of the *content* of revelation, both maintain a surprisingly similar understanding of faith as the moment of 'conjunction' between our lives and divine grace, whether this is the existential encounter in which we know ourselves to be known by the Other, or the hermeneutical moment in which we are 'gripped' by the Subject matter of the text. This moment of faith then becomes for both, "the logical or interpretive context in which theological language and theological dogma are taken to make sense".⁷⁰

Many commentators have problems with Barth's 'faith hermeneutic'. Anthony Thiselton, for example, considers the complaint, that Barth has so transferred the hermeneutical principle to the divine side of the dialectic – "How else will God be recognised except by God Himself?"⁷¹ – that hermeneutics as the human act of interpretation is effectively an impossibility.⁷² However, Frei's issues with Barth are located elsewhere. His problem with the 'faith hermeneutic', is that for the Neo-Orthodox, the 'moment of faith' had crossed over from being simply the logical precondition of the doctrinal enterprise (as it was for Barth), to being the focus of theology in itself:

In other words, in this view the rationale of how one comes to believe comes to control, indeed be virtually identical with the logic of belief, i.e., the meaning and interconnection of dogmatic statements.⁷³

⁷⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 57.

⁷¹ Barth, *CDI/2*, 521, cited in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein*, (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1980), 88.

⁷² "Barth's opposition to the emphasis of Schleiermacher and Ritschl on religious experience, together with his stress on the sovereign transcendence of God, has led him beyond this starting point [in Pauline and Johannine theology], so that at times it seems to be implied that the Spirit's communication of the Word of God is somehow independent of all ordinary processes of human understanding." Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 89.

⁷³ Frei, *Identity*, 57–8.

Ultimately, Barth's hermeneutical scheme is a matter of purely logical order: given that it is impossible to "recognise" God in scripture unless God has revealed to us, a right reading of scripture can only be made at Stage 3, logically *after* God has revealed. But in actuality, revelation and right reading are given together, and have been separated out into three separate stages for the purpose of description only. However, the existentialists' 'error', as Frei sees it, has been to equate this matter of mere grammatical ordering with an ontological and epistemological reality. In their view, if revelation is necessary for a right reading of scripture, then revelation is not merely *logically*, but also *actually* prior. Revelation is thus abstracted from the 'objective' encounter with God in scripture, and thus the subjective encounter with God in the existential moment becomes not merely the starting point, but the whole subject-matter of theology. And so, once again, entirely unwarranted ontological and epistemological significance had been loaded onto the light-weight cart of grammatical order.

5.3 Frei on the 'Faith Hermeneutic'

It is important to note once again, that Frei sees himself as writing from a similar 'inside faith' perspective to Barth and Schleiermacher, and can envision no other way of doing theology:

The believer will talk about the relation or presence of Jesus Christ in one way, the nonbeliever in another, the pilgrim in yet a third. Essentially, what I shall write about constitutes a reflection within belief. In a sense, therefore, there is no argument to be developed. I do not make a certain assumption on which I then build an expanding series of consequences or inferences leading to the discovery of some final, wholly new conclusions. Also, I do not try to justify the grounds on which I make my primary assumption. Concerning that assumption, I shall simply appeal to the consent of believers.⁷⁴

For Frei, as for Barth, non-apologetic theology starts from the *assumption* of faith, rather than attempting to account for or 'produce' the moment of faith. As a result, he sees theology as essentially descriptive and dogmatic, rather than argumentative and apologetic. However, this does not mean that faith becomes a kind of gnostic special access to understanding. Rather, it means simply that God's being and revelation must be assumed before theology can proceed. The alternative is to be stuck in apologetics for evermore.

⁷⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 67.

However, Frei's own take on the logic of belief, is that we cannot say that we have faith in God until we know who is this God in whom we have faith. Even if we can say we have had a revelatory encounter with God, this 'God' remains an abstraction until we can identify some descriptive content. And we cannot identify any content, we cannot know *who is this God*, until we read scripture, most crucially as God reveals in Jesus Christ, as narrated by the gospels. Moreover, we will subsequently struggle to identify this 'contentless' God in whom we have faith with the concrete scriptural account of God's story. As Nicholas Wolterstorff observes:

Frei was struck by the fact that if one looked carefully at what the biblical critics said about the function of the biblical narratives, and if one then asked oneself what one would expect a text playing that function to be like, it turned out over and over that the texts of the biblical narratives were not like that at all. Over and over there was a singularly inept mismatch between these actual texts and the function that they were said to be playing. It was said, for example, that they were mythical in their function. But we have texts of myths from the Greeks, the Romans, and the Norse, and the biblical narratives are strikingly unlike those. What struck Frei, in short, was how little attention biblical critics paid to the actual narratives of Scripture.⁷⁵

For Frei, therefore, a 'faith hermeneutic', in whatever guise, is a logical nonsense. He does not dismiss the idea that there is such a thing as a personal encounter with the presence of Jesus: it is just that such an "*ad hoc*"⁷⁶ experience cannot then become a "necessary (or even a necessary though insufficient) logical condition for the meaningfulness of dogmatic language."⁷⁷ This is to build a theological edifice on too flimsy a structure. So neither the journey to the point of faith, nor the moment of revelation in itself, can be a logical precondition for the right reading of scripture, however it may work out in actuality.

Frei, then rejects the concept of a faith-hermeneutic, and instead proposes a controversial model of the right reading of scripture, which – at least initially – bypasses the notion of revelation altogether. While Frei's "basic conviction" is

⁷⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Important of Hermeneutics for a Christian Worldview", in *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective*, ed. Roger Lundin (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, 25–48), 39.

⁷⁶ This is an interesting use of the term '*ad hoc*' here. Frei uses it as descriptive of lived experience, which is clearly *ad hoc* in the sense that it is different for everyone and everyone comes at faith from a different angle. Thus, as an *ad hoc* methodology is adapted to a particular text and particular task, so an *ad hoc* faith experience is adapted to a particular person in a particular existential moment. The point is that neither of an *ad hoc* methodology nor an *ad hoc* religious experience should ever be abstracted to the status of a universally-applicable method or path to enlightenment.

⁷⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 58.

derived from ‘within faith’, from the church’s communal reading, it will be remembered that there is at least a logical ‘first reading’ of scripture. On such a first reading, as Frei sees it, the ‘plain sense’ of the text makes it clear that the subject matter of the text is God. This is no gnostic mystery available only to those who read in faith, but is straightforwardly given in the narrative. Furthermore, the plain narrative sense of the text gives us all the information we need in order to know the actual ‘content’ of God’s identity as it is narratively constituted: the God of scripture is no mere concept, but throughout the Old and New Testament is narrated as being personal, emotional, and involved, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

However, as Frei’s “basic conviction” states, to know Jesus’ (or God’s) identity is to have Jesus (or God) present, given that we cannot even conceive of any content to God except that God has revealed that content. In this way Frei collapses together the three stages of Barth’s hermeneutic: logically, no re-reading is required, for if the narrative is sufficient in itself to convey the content of God, then no special gift of faith is necessary *prior* to right interpretation. Of course, Frei would argue that faith is most probably given *with* right interpretation, and grammatically – given that we cannot say everything at once – should probably be discussed *after* right interpretation (not before, as with Barth). And in actuality, the believer will no doubt delight in constant re-reading of scripture, and by God’s grace will thereby continue to achieve an ever more profound understanding of this God whom they worship. But simple though an initial understanding of God might be on a logical ‘first reading’, the reader who identifies the God of the narrative as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” has identified the content of God correctly, regardless of faith-stance. In short, the realistic narrative *is* the ‘true meaning’ of scripture, and the true content of God, which is the starting point for theology.

Thus Frei contrasts the false theological grammar of the “experiential sequence” of faith with the much truer grammar of the “dogmatic explanation”,⁷⁸ as derived from scripture. To state the point once again, Frei is not disparaging experience in any way. Rather, he is talking about the fact that theology and apologetics have an

⁷⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 59.

entirely different grammatical logic, and that the two enterprises should not be confused. As he states quite categorically:

Whatever one's experiential sequence, the dogmatic explanation proceeds, and proceeds with confidence, in this order.⁷⁹

This is what Frei means by “the logic of belief”: it is about finding the correct starting point for theology, and proceeding from there. It will be necessary in another chapter to explore quite how this logical sequence works when it comes to the identity and presence of Jesus Christ, particularly with reference to the events surrounding his death and resurrection. However, at this stage it is enough simply to note what Frei is setting out to do, and his conception of the possibilities and limits of his scheme. Whatever else it may be, his co-positing of Jesus' identity and presence will be descriptive and not explanatory, dogmatic and not apologetic, ‘actual’ and not experiential. Above all, it will be founded on that vital first step: a correct exegetical reading of scripture which alone can provide the necessary content to ground the believer's affirmation of faith in a God who is an objective reality.

6. The Realistic Narrative Hermeneutic

6.1 The Grammatical Logic of Reading

Finally, Frei moves in his preface to an explanation of just what such a ‘correct’ reading of scripture might look like. This process obviously begs some sceptical questions: just how do we decide what constitutes a ‘correct’ reading, and on what authority does Frei make the claim that his reading is more correct than another? However, Frei is well aware of these points of order, as his preface demonstrates.

Frei's theological proposal – that to know Jesus' identity is to have him present, and to recognise him as the presence of God – rests on a method which he terms here a

⁷⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 59.

“realistic narrative”⁸⁰ hermeneutic. “Realistic narrative” is Frei’s label for the essential genre of the gospels, based on what he identifies as

*One of the characteristics of the Gospel story ... viz., that it is history-like – in its language as well as its depiction of a common public world ... in the close interaction of character and incident, and in the non-symbolic quality of the relation between the story and what the story is about.*⁸¹

It is no absolute category, and he makes no claims for having made an exhaustive interpretation of the gospels. But what he does say is that precisely because the relation between the story and the referent is “non-symbolic”, that is, entirely direct and even literal, this means that we cannot have the ‘subject matter’ – Jesus Christ, and hence God – without the story.

This is Frei’s crucial point about the grammatical logic of belief. Here, Richard Burnett’s comment on Barth is equally applicable to Frei:

I would argue that Barth’s theology ... is systematic in the sense that it reflects the fact that not everything can be said about God at once and that when talking about God some things ought to be said before others.⁸²

In other words, where grammatical logic insists that the ‘subject’ Jesus Christ is prior to the predicate, which is his story, or to put it another way, ontology is prior to epistemology, Frei reiterated point is that grammatical logic should not be identified without remainder with ontological actuality. Just because the subject necessarily precedes the predicate, does not mean that it can be posited independently of the predicate, so that Jesus Christ cannot be posited independently of his story, nor God of God’s content. Therefore, while there remains a correct grammatical order for conducting theology, the *actual* order may be an entirely different thing.

⁸⁰ This label was later to prove vexing to Frei, and as such confirms him in his utter dislike of labels. In his Alexander Thompson Memorial Lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1986, Frei observes rather ruefully that “In the next life, if I have any choice, there will be two terms that I shall eschew, one is “hermeneutics”, the other is “narrative”!” This lecture was published as “Conflicts in Interpretation: Resolution, Armistice, or Co-existence?” in Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 153–66, citation 155.

⁸¹ Frei, *Identity*, 59.

⁸² Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, 4.

Frei's appreciation of the grammatical order of belief is not always understood. In his "Forward" to Burnett's book⁸³, Bruce McCormack contends that the "Yale theologians" – Frei is not mentioned by name, but is implicated – have tended to over-stress the *ad hoc* nature of Barth's hermeneutics, to the point that the language of the text has taken on an unwarranted power to "disclose meaning". Following this line of reasoning leads to a situation where language in itself has the power to "form persons" and "socialize(ing) new members into religious communities".⁸⁴ This is a clear critique of the 'Lindbeck stream' of postliberal theology. By contrast, both McCormack and Burnett wish to argue that Barth did indeed have quite definite hermeneutical principles which certainly can be quantified into a "well-ordered hermeneutical approach"⁸⁵, as described above in the discussion of Barth's three "stages".

In defence of Frei, it might be argued in reply that '*ad hoc*-ness' is merely a method – merely grammar – and *never* the ontological *Ding-an-sich*. Moreover, Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic is no *ad hoc* free-for-all. Rather, the term "*ad hoc*" refers to his insistence, that the test of the validity of a hermeneutic, in this instance as in all instances, will be the practice of exegesis, and not any kind of general hermeneutical theory:

Now insisting on the integrity and distinctive character of realistic narrative is finally less important than exhibiting the case exegetically. The crucial test is to take a significant instance that appears to exhibit these features and see whether the claim is actually fruitful when put into operation. This is especially true since the suitable procedure for elucidating the category – and the stories by means of it – is probably not best dignified by being called a method. As if it were composed of a series of distinctly demonstrable steps which together form a whole, subject to independent description, and then, as a separate and subsequent procedure, applicable to the textual materials to be exegeted! In the instance of realistic narrative interpretation the exegetical practice is indispensable to the theory of exegesis, and ruled use governs the statement of the rules actually used. Therefore the amount of theory involved is minimal. There should be enough to elucidate what is actually being done in exegesis, and no more.⁸⁶

⁸³ Bruce L. McCormack, "Forward", in Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), ix–xi.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* x.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 60–1.

Like Barth, Frei eschews all but the most minimal method. He even dislikes having to describe his approach, preferring to demonstrate it in practice. Exegesis – ruled use – will prove or disprove the integrity of his chosen realistic narrative ‘method’. This very practical approach is what Frei understand by the *ad hoc* methodological principle: not an absence of hermeneutical rules but simply that exegesis will be simultaneously the source, the practice, and the test of any such rules. What Frei is concerned with is, once again, a matter of grammatical order. The problem which Frei exposed in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* was that Enlightenment practice had given priority to the pursuit of a general hermeneutic, and when they thought they had found one, had used it to subjugate the biblical text. By contrast, Frei claims that the text should have priority over the rule. Indeed, the particular rule should be derived *from* the particular text in the process of reading it: from a recognition of its genre and from the particular demands it makes on the reader. But even at that, once this rule has been ‘extracted’ from the text and formalised, it has gained a kind of abstractive independence from the text, which in turn potentially invalidates the rule. Once again, actual exegesis will be the test *even of a rule derived from exegesis*, so that the logical ‘first reading’ is in effect ever repeated. This is not a random, anything-goes approach to hermeneutics, but a simple refusal to formulate any method – even the realistic narrative one – into a generalised system for interpretation.

This logical ‘first reading’ should not be confused with Paul Ricoeur’s concept of a “second naiveté”⁸⁷, summarised by Charles Wood as a “conviction that theological interpretation of the Bible ought to lead us beyond a critical preoccupation with the text into a fresh encounter with the divine reality to which the text bears witness”.⁸⁸ For Ricoeur, this is a three-step process. Firstly, we abandon our first childish faith in the literal truths of the biblical myths. However, this abandonment takes us to a place of loss – the “desert of criticism” – where we cannot forget these myths, and are obliged to examine them critically. After critical examination, we now “wish to be called again” to a “second naiveté”, in which these myths and symbols now

⁸⁷ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 349–50.

⁸⁸ Charles M. Wood, “Review: Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*”, in *Theology Today* 48 (1992), 482–3.

appear to us as new and fresh insight, which is synonymous with a “naïve” yet chastened faith.⁸⁹

In his book on Ricoeur⁹⁰, Mark Wallace compares Ricoeur’s system with Barth’s ‘faith hermeneutic’. As he notes, there is indeed a superficial similarity in their “tripartite hermeneutical method”.⁹¹ However, as Wallace is well aware, this formal similarity conceals a significant material difference. In particular, Barth is not so inclined to dismiss the initial ‘childish’ faith, and also resists ‘translating’ these myths and symbols into contemporary meaning. Frei, meanwhile, regards Ricoeur as employing what Kevin Vanhoozer describes as a “typical extratextual apologetic strategy”⁹², which means that he is at heart a ‘foundationalist’, in the best liberal tradition. However, and more significantly from the point of view of this project, Frei’s problem with Ricoeur is that he once again fails to separate out grammatical logic from ontology and epistemology. In Ricoeur’s system, “reality and language are united in human beings as bearers of metaphor ... The ineluctable movement from meaning to truth ... is not, in this case, the movement from history-like shape to possible historical referent, but from textual language to ontological referent.”⁹³ Frei’s ‘logical first reading’ (my term, not his), advocates no such abstract hermeneutical method. It is a much simpler and less loaded point about grammatical order, and is not an epistemological system.

6.2 *Contra* the Hermeneutical Circle

So for Frei, working on the principle of an *ad hoc* hermeneutical method, actual exegesis will be the test of a realistic narrative reading – which hermeneutic was in itself dictated in the first place by his gospel exegesis. However, the rules governing

⁸⁹ For Frei’s own treatment of Ricoeur’s concept, see “The “Literal Reading” of Biblical Narrative”, 130ff.

⁹⁰ Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, (Georgia: Mercer Press, 1990).

⁹¹ Wallace. xiv.

⁹² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Review: Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*”, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48, (1995), 97–9, 98.

⁹³ Hans W. Frei, “Conflicts in Interpretation: Resolution, Armistice, or Co-existence?” in Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 153–66, 163.

this method cannot then be abstracted from the gospels only to be re-applied to the same (or another) text. Method is given together with the text; they cannot be separated; there is no universal method, nor any means of arriving at one. In this Frei is particularly anxious to get away from the 19th century concept of the ‘hermeneutical circle’, in which the whole and the parts are understood through each other. In reference to the existentialist New Hermeneutic school⁹⁴, Frei writes:

... this school of thought is heavily beholden to Idealist antecedents, especially in its reliance on the notion of the ‘hermeneutical circle’. This term means not only that in utterances whole and parts have to be understood through each other, but that any explicit interpretation presupposes a logically prior, low-level, or implicit understanding. In effect, this means that any interpretation rests on a shared structure of distinctively human being between interpreter and what is to be interpreted.⁹⁵

On one level, Frei dislikes the ‘hermeneutical circle’ precisely because it is a ‘outside faith’ philosophical principle illegitimately applied to scriptural exegesis. But he extends his dislike of the ‘hermeneutical circle’ even to such hermeneutical methods which are derived from biblical exegesis itself. Although such methods seem to put the biblical text in a position of authority over its own interpretation, what happens in actuality is that yet again a theory has been abstracted and universalised, and in the process has been made logically prior to practice.

The problem Frei has with the concept of the hermeneutical circle is that it is posited on precisely this “logically prior, low-level, or implicit understanding”. This means in effect, that the text has already been read and understood on some level *before* it has been read. When it comes to the biblical text, this implies that we humans have some “implicit” knowledge of God *apart from* his revelation in Jesus Christ and his narrative identity.

The position in this hermeneutical philosophy [i.e., general hermeneutics], of which the ‘hermeneutical circle’ is a typical aspect, is that the specifically human element, the dialectic

⁹⁴ The New Hermeneutic was a particular mid-20th century theological development, founded in the main by the work of Rudolf Bultmann. Burnett describes how “as Barth continued to swim along, as it were, Bultmann and his students became increasingly interested in hermeneutics as a subject in its own right.” (*Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, 31.) The ‘New Hermeneutic’ developed out of Barth’s dialectical theology, but saw itself also as a representation of much of Schleiermacher’s *Hermeneutics*, which was republished in 1959. By 1964, James M. Robinson was describing Schleiermacher as “materially a precursor of the new hermeneutic” (“Hermeneutics after Barth”, in *The New Hermeneutic*, ed. James M. Robinson, New York: Harper & Row, 1964, 71.) Likewise, Gerhard Ebeling describes Schleiermacher as the “pioneer” of the New Hermeneutic. (*Word and Faith*, London: SCM Press, 1963, 317.) See Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, 31–3.

⁹⁵ Frei, *Identity*, 62.

in which man is himself and language is distinctively human, is what any exegesis must uncover. Public circumstances, social context, and structures, incidents all become meaningful only as they are related, systematically and internally, to the specific self-world of the text as appropriated through interpretation... When this view, with its claim to omniscience in interpretation, is applied to realistic narrative, not only is the subject matter turned into something other than the story and what it depicts, but even what is supposed to be the true subject matter is *nothing* except in and by the relation and family semblance between it and the interpreter.⁹⁶

Frei abhors this separation of God from his narrative. Such a separation of text and referent is a hallmark of the very liberal hermeneutic which Frei was trying to escape throughout *Eclipse*, and in Frei's own time had become a feature even of such an anti-liberal school as Neo-Orthodoxy. More worryingly, this separation of text and referent is at least an occasional problem even with Barth, who likewise suggests that the true 'subject matter' of the text (God) is somehow *beyond* the text:

We all know the curiosity that comes over us when from a window we see the people in the street suddenly stop and look up – shade their eyes with their hands and look straight up into the sky toward something which is hidden from us by the roof. Our curiosity is superfluous, for what they see is doubtless an aeroplane. But as to the sudden stopping, looking up, and tense attention characteristic of the people of the Bible, our wonder will not so lightly be dismissed. To me personally it came first with Paul: this man evidently sees and hears something which is above everything, which is absolutely beyond the range of my observation and the measure of my thought.⁹⁷

As an analogy, Frei is unlikely to disagree with this. He himself makes no claims that we somehow 'have' God in the biblical text, and throughout *Identity* describes its witness even to Jesus as "indirect".⁹⁸ Frei's problem is the accompanying claim, that *until* God is actually glimpsed, we do not have understanding of the texts. What is more, this 'glimpse' of God, when it happens, happens as an internal 'faith event'. Hence, understanding of the subject matter is once again predicated on a faith hermeneutic. The text is somehow not as sufficient as it should be, and if the text is not sufficient without faith for rendering God's identity, then we have to draw on some *a priori* philosophical or existentialist principle to make up the deficiency.

⁹⁶ Frei, *Identity*. 62–3. (my italics)

⁹⁷ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and The Word of Man*, (Harper & Brothers Publishers: New York, 1957), 62–3.

⁹⁸ This concept of indirect revelation will be considered in detail in Chapter 5, in the subsection headed "Frei's Doctrine of Analogy". See pages 214–20.

6.3 Frei's Linear Hermeneutic

Frei's alternative and daring proposal is that absolutely no prior faith or knowledge of God is necessary as a precondition for right understanding of the biblical texts. Any such knowledge or faith is given not *prior* to reading the biblical texts but, if it is given at all, it is given *in the process of reading them*:

Persons and publicly accessible circumstances are indispensable to each other, even as they are irreducible to each other. In their interaction they form the story and thereby cumulatively render its subject matter. They render it – and thus the sense of the text – to the reader, no matter how he disposes himself toward the story on a personal level.⁹⁹

In practice, this means that a nonbeliever, when they read the Bible, starts on exactly the same level playing field as the believer. This is the importance of what I have termed the 'logical first reading'. If the nonbeliever reads rightly the narrative identity of Jesus Christ, forming *and* testing a hypothesis in the process, then even if they do not thereby come to faith, they have nevertheless rightly understood the gospel texts. Hence Frei can conclude his preface:

My hope is that the exegetical and accompanying hermeneutical inquiry will show that, no matter whether one is a believing Christian or not, one can make sense of the Gospel story in its own right, and that making sense of it that way entails important consequences for a theology based on this narrative.¹⁰⁰

The leap which may or may not happen, from right understanding of the texts to faith in the living God, is not Frei's concern: his non-apologetic, 'inside faith' perspective means that he has no scheme to account for how a person comes to faith, except to say that the text has no power in itself to 'produce' faith. But whether or not the nonbeliever comes to believe, they have at their disposal all the tools required for a right reading, not because of some inherent 'God-consciousness', nor yet because of some existential awareness of the presence or absence of God in their lives, but precisely because the gospel texts are sufficient *in themselves* to "render depictively to the reader their own public world, which is the world he needs to understand them."¹⁰¹ *Contra* Barth, not even historical study of the Bible is necessary as a precondition for understanding the gospels. In a way similar to how a realistic novel renders its imaginary world to the reader, so do the gospels in their 'history-like' depiction of the interaction of character, setting, and event. While, for example, a historical knowledge of the slum conditions of Victorian London might help us to a

⁹⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 62.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 63.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 61.

greater appreciation of the achievement of Dickens in *Oliver Twist*, such knowledge is no precondition to understanding the novel. Quite the contrary: the novel itself gives us more than enough information for us imaginatively to enter its world at a first reading. The gospel texts likewise.

In a key observation cited above, Frei remarks how it is the interaction of persons and circumstances which “form(s) the story and thereby cumulatively render(s) its subject matter”. The crucial word here is “cumulatively”. What we have here, in opposition to the hermeneutical circle, is something more like a *linear* understanding of reading. In such a linear model, layer upon layer of understanding is built up as the story progresses, by the end of which – and only by the end – we have a full understanding of the story’s meaning. Perhaps the most straightforward analogy (although with unfortunate connotations!) would be to that most typical of realistic genres, the detective novel. There comes at the end of such a novel a sense of completeness, as all the half-understood, barely noticed ‘clues’ at last come together to support the ‘fittingness’ of the truth which is finally and fully revealed. Moreover, it is only at this point that the full identity of at least one of the characters – the murderer – is revealed. Crucially, this final knowledge of the truth does not then necessitate a rereading before we can fully understand – although such a rereading may of course be pleasurable, and may deepen our understanding of character and plot. Rather, our final knowledge of the story’s true subject matter is the product of many cumulative moments of ambiguous revelation as character and plot interact, leading up to the climactic moment of unambiguous revelation. At this point, the reader’s response to that revelation is not so much surprise (though it may include that), as recognition of the fittingness of an ending which effectively had been prepared for all along. Whatever the many differences between the modern realistic novel and the gospels, these similarities should be admitted. After all, it is of the nature of revelation to be both ‘out of the blue’ – truly *deus ex machina* – and yet entirely providential and fitting, part of the narrative of God’s interaction with creation.

Conclusion: Revelation, Hermeneutics, and the Logic of Belief

Therefore, where Barth says that we have not fully understood the Bible until we have read it through the hermeneutic of faith, by contrast, Frei says that we *can* fully understand the gospel texts without bringing faith into the equation, although faith may indeed be given simultaneously with understanding. Thiselton, then, is not entirely correct when he states that “for believing readers, whom Frei distinguishes from unbelievers and also from pilgrims, the identity of Jesus Christ is given in and through the narrative texts...”¹⁰² The statement needs qualification, for God’s revelation is first and foremost to *unfaith*, to the dialectically estranged world where everyone has said ‘No!’ to God. Indeed, that ‘No!’ could not have become the existential ‘Yes!’ of the believer, *except that revelation has been given*. In this way Frei avoids taking the very relativistic and existentialist step in which revelation can be spoken about only as ‘true-for-us’. Rather, God’s self-revelation in Jesus is ‘true-for-all’, able to be comprehended by anyone via scripture, though that in itself will not make faith ‘happen’. Once again, its grammatical expression is not the same as the ontological/epistemological event itself, and we do not ‘have’ God in God’s revelation, any more than we ‘have’ Arthur Conan Doyle in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The text is truly the self-expression of the author, and so truly reveals the author. And yet, in Barthian terms, the ‘unveiling’ is accompanied by a ‘veiling’: the being of the author remains elusive, revealed in, but not ontologically identical with, the grammatical medium. And of course, more so than any human author, God controls God’s own self-expression.

Nevertheless, the world created by the text is sufficient in itself to procure that right understanding of God’s content on a first reading. To insist, as Barth does, that faith is prior to proper understanding of the subject matter, is *logically* to demand belief before content. Frei’s point is that the equation must be reversed, so that understanding must be conceptualised as logically prior to faith – otherwise, what do we have faith *in*, but an abstraction? Once again, this is a logical and not necessarily

¹⁰² Anthony Thiselton, “The Hermeneutics of Pastoral Theology: Ten Strategies for Reading Texts in Relation to Various Reading-Situations (1992)”, in *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: The Collected Works and New Essays of Anthony Thiselton*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 349–84, 361.

an actual ordering: Frei puts no limits on the working of God, and Barth's three-step faith hermeneutic, or the existentialist version of the abstracted revelatory encounter, may indeed correspond very closely to the experience of many believers.

For Frei, a right hermeneutic will produce neither faith nor revelation. An appropriate hermeneutic is simply a matter of establishing the grammatical starting point for our attempts to say something about God. God's revelation is not in itself located in the text; all the text provides is the precondition for speaking about revelation. To our first category, then, of *The Content of God*, we add the category of *The Logic of Belief*. As will become evident in the course of the next three chapters, the two are entirely interdependent.

Chapter 3 The Realistic Narrative Hermeneutic

1. Introduction

Once again, it is worth reminding ourselves of Richard Burnett's neat summary: that "not everything can be said about God at once and that when talking about God some things ought to be said before others". If the logic of belief is to be understood, not as circular but as linear, then when it comes to theological 'system' (for want of a better word), the issue of saying some things before others begs the obvious grammatical question, *what to say first?* Acknowledged or otherwise, every theological system has a starting point, and given the dialectic separation of God and creation, that starting point is almost always located somewhere in the doctrine of revelation. As pointed out in the previous chapter, the result of starting in the wrong place is that an abstract starting point leads inevitably to an abstract conception of God. Therefore, if this conclusion is to be challenged at all, then that challenge must address itself to the foundational *a priori* assumption of that system.

Of course, in the *actual* order of things, the historical Jesus Christ was and is God's primary revelation, to which scripture bears witness. That is a given for Frei, although this is not always understood. In particular, Francesca Murphy claims that for "story Barthians", such as she categorises Frei, the words of the story are not in any way required to "correspond" with the historical actuality:

It could be contended that [the story Barthians] shored up their foundation in Scripture at the expense of relegating the truth of *correspondence* to realities outside the biblical system to a second place, basing their faith solely in the intrasystematic *coherence* of their beliefs.¹

True, Frei's fellow Yale theologian, George Lindbeck, does indeed write about the "intra-textuality" and self-referentiality of religious language, in which "The proper way to determine what "God" signifies, for example, is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience".² Whatever might be the applicativeness of this criticism to other "story Barthians", once again it is appropriate to distinguish Frei from the 'school' in general. What has happened here is that Murphy has noted Frei's distinction between ontology and grammar, but

¹ Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 151.

² Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

has not understood his point about the order of belief. For Frei, as for Barth, the witness of scripture remains a secondary witness to the primary historical reality which was God's revelation in Jesus Christ. In that case, the actual order is *first* the reality of the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, and *then* the witness of scripture. The witness of scripture must indeed "correspond" to the actual Jesus simply because ontology comes first, and controls its predicates. However, *in the logic of belief*, the starting point has to be scripture. This is not to say that scripture somehow 'produces' the actual Jesus: despite a necessary "correspondence", grammar cannot carry that much ontological weight. It is simply the only way to avoid the hermeneutical circle and the problem of a pre-existent interpretative scheme, for every other starting point can be nothing other than an abstract idea of Jesus, a Christ-without-content.

Thus Frei is obliged to deduce *from the text* that Jesus Christ is God's revelation (if indeed the text will support that hypothesis), rather than to begin with an ontology, as Barth does and as Murphy would prefer to do. This is not a retreat into an existentialist 'for us' condition before revelation can be revelatory, and nor is it another instance of a christology-from-below. The biblical story does not supplant the 'real' Jesus, as Murphy claims. It is simply to admit that scripture provides our only record of who Jesus is. Without scripture, he is no more than a name; without scripture, we would not even *know* his name. We do not by this admission bind God to scripture, or consider God to be trapped in God's own story. Rather, in the humility of the failure of our reason, we are forced to accept that God has bound Godself to scripture. Having elected to become incarnate in the medium of chronologically linear history, God has in effect written Godself into the human story, so that the realistic narrative form is peculiarly suited to the description of this *self-storied* God. It is God's own decree, then, that the story related by scripture is to be our sole access to the content of God. While we may indeed, and with accuracy, locate other moments of revelation elsewhere, these 'revelations' have no content unless we identify them with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus Frei can maintain, that apart from scripture, God reveals nothing of any content to us; and a content-less revelation is no revelation at all.

For these reasons, Frei's understanding of the linear logic of belief obliges him to start his theology with scripture: that indirect, doubly veiled, most secondary Word of God, whose adequacy as a medium of revelation had been questioned and doubted by two centuries of scholarship before Frei came to tackle the problem. Somehow, this secondary Word had now to be read in such a way that the identity of Jesus Christ can be understood and doctrinally described. That is why, for Frei in his time, revelation had become a hermeneutical issue.

2. The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative

Frei's mature theological project, described in his preface to *Identity*, was actually launched the previous year with the 1974 publication, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. This book can be read as an exercise in critical historical theology: Frei painstakingly traces the development of biblical hermeneutics and accompanying theology from the 'premodern' approach of Luther and Calvin through the changes wrought by 18th and 19th century Enlightenment philosophy, culminating in D.F. Strauss and Schleiermacher. From the first chapter, it becomes clear that, for all his recognition that there is no going back, Frei's sympathies are primarily with the premodern approach to scripture. By contrast, he condemns the Enlightenment hermeneutical project as having been disastrous for biblical theology.

However, when read in tandem with *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, it becomes clear that Frei has a larger agenda than simply critiquing historical hermeneutics. For all that their roots lie in the past, Frei's theological opponents are not historical figures, but decidedly contemporary ones. His preface to *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* is unambiguous in this respect, when he writes in praise of the contemporary philosopher Gilbert Ryle, that

Ryle's work ... is a marvellous antidote to the contorted and to my mind unsuccessful efforts of certain phenomenologists and philosophers of 'Existence' and 'Being' to tackle a similar dualism. And therefore it serves to explain better than they do how it is that we can read written discourse with the expectation of doing it reasonably intelligently.³

³ Frei, *Eclipse*, vii.

As his preface to *Identity* confirms, Frei's aim is to counter Christian existentialist theology, first of all by exposing the 'errors' of similar – indeed, formative – misreadings of scripture in the history of biblical hermeneutics, and then by offering the positive suggestion of a “realistic narrative” reading. This project, begun ‘negatively’ in *Eclipse*, is developed in positive fashion in *Identity*.

But before we get to the positive account in *Identity*, it is *Eclipse* which offers the first definition of Frei's proposed “realistic narrative hermeneutic”. The confident tone of *Eclipse* is a long way from the more hesitant evaluations offered by Frei's 1950s essays: almost twenty years after his thesis, it seems that Frei has finally worked out his own positive theology. Frei's Preface to *Eclipse* cites as “particularly influential on my thought”⁴ Erich Auerbach, Karl Barth, and Ryle; tellingly, there is no longer any mention of his teacher Niebuhr, whose concept of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ history Frei has now rejected. It seems that Niebuhr's influence has been negated by Ryle in particular, about whom Frei writes, “Anybody interested in hermeneutics has special reason to be grateful to the book [*The Concept of Mind*] for its demystification of the concept of intentional personal action, and the author's steady refusal to divide intelligent activity into separate mental and external components.” Frei smoothly appropriates this insight of Ryle's into the *person* for discussion of the *text*: as Frei observes, “It is a lesson well applied to the way one views written statements and hence also how to read them”.⁵ For our purposes, we note also that the direction can just as easily be reversed, so that what Frei says about the *text* is equally applicable to the *person*, and in particular, the person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, this insight of Ryle's into the person is applicable not only to hermeneutics and to history, but also to the doctrine of revelation, and ultimately, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 4, to the knowledge of the content of God.

Frei's thesis in *Eclipse* is that the Enlightenment search for meaning ‘behind’ the literal sense of the text has resulted in the negating of the story of God in scripture. In the introduction, Frei outlines and approves the contrasting hermeneutic of the

⁴ Frei, *Eclipse*, vii.

⁵ *Ibid.* viii.

“literal sense”⁶ as employed by Luther and Calvin. This ‘literal sense’ hermeneutic, for all its simplicity to modern eyes and ignorance of the hard questions posed by science, nevertheless was one which was, according to Frei’s criteria, ‘successful’, in that it did adequate justice to the biblical narrative.

Frei identifies three features of premodern Reformed hermeneutics which meant that the prominence of the narrative was maintained:

First, if it seemed clear that a biblical story was to be read literally, it followed automatically that it referred to and described actual historical occurrences...

The second element in precritical realistic reading was that if the real historical world described by the several biblical stories is a single world of one temporal sequence, there must in principle be one cumulative story to depict it...

In the third place, since the world truly rendered by combining biblical narratives into one was indeed the one and only real world, it must in principle embrace the experience of any present age and reader.⁷

These three principles are highly suggestive when it comes to Frei’s own approach. Crucially, all three are concerned with the unity of scripture: firstly, the unity of text and referent; secondly, the unity of all biblical events and genres, including Old and New Testaments; and thirdly, the unity of historical past and historical present. And as noted above, what can be applied to the text of scripture can be applied also to the person, an account of whose identity must provide for a similar unity of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ self, of disparate events and experiences, and of past and present. These, therefore, are the themes which Frei pursues throughout *Eclipse* and on into *Identity*. Accordingly, they will be used to structure our study of Frei’s hermeneutical preferences.

The following discussion shall therefore follow *Eclipse* in giving a threefold account. Firstly, each heading will introduce the precritical hermeneutic of Luther and Calvin,

⁶ Usefully defined by Kathryn Greene-McCreight as follows: ‘In the nascent Christian tradition, there developed a preoccupation with what we will call the “plain sense” of scripture. Various theologians throughout the history of interpretation have used different terms to refer to this preoccupation, e.g., “literal sense”, “simple sense”, and “historical sense.” While these terms each have slightly different nuances, they all tend to overlap insofar as they point to a strategy to cope with the interrelated problems of the relation of the two testaments and the privileging of this Christological interpretative key to the whole of scripture.’ Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth read the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 3.

⁷ Frei, *Eclipse*, 2–3.

as understood by Frei. This will be followed by a brief description of the Enlightenment rebuttal of the precritical position, and then a detailed consideration of Schleiermacher's hermeneutical response to the problems raised. Thereafter, Frei's climactic appreciation and despair in *Eclipse* of Schleiermacher's biblical hermeneutics will help us to pinpoint what he found useful therein for his own project, and what he discarded as inimical to the narrative genre of the gospels. Lastly, having defined Frei's understanding of his hermeneutical heritage and the choices available to him, the final aim will be to describe Frei's own hermeneutical proposal, the realistic narrative hermeneutic, which is the 'literal sense' in its modern form.

3. Figuration as the Principle of the Unity of Scripture

3.1 Unity of Text and Referent

First, if it seemed clear that a biblical story was to be read literally, it followed automatically that it referred to and described actual historical occurrences...

In the premodern hermeneutical scheme, Frei describes how Luther and Calvin had taken on faith that the biblical narratives referred to real historical people and events. However, with the advent of the Enlightenment, for the first time the narratives were subjected to the following questions: "Do the stories and whatever concepts may be drawn from them describe what we apprehend as the real world? Do they fit a more general framework of meaning than that of a single story?"⁸ In effect, the Enlightenment hermeneutic of reason apprehended the world of our senses, not merely as separate from the 'mythical' world of the Bible, but as rationally superior to it, and infinitely more trustworthy. As a result, scientific and historical investigation could now be used to judge the veracity of the biblical narratives, and if there was a mismatch, then it was the Bible which was obliged to give way.

Frei's contention is that this search for "the subject matter beyond the text"⁹ had "obscured narrative meaning"¹⁰ in modern biblical hermeneutics. Now a word, a

⁸ Frei, *Eclipse*, 5.

⁹ Ibid. 312.

¹⁰ Ibid. 313.

sentence, or a text was understood as having only one referent; and moreover, the relationship between the two was oblique. In practice, this meant that the first question the reader had to ask of the text was one which neither Calvin nor Luther had ever considered: whether a Bible story ‘really happened’. If it were demonstrated by historical or scientific investigation that this was indeed the case, then *no further meaning need be sought*: the text was merely descriptive of something that happened in the past, and as Lessing’s neat aphorism points out, “Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason”.¹¹ Hence the discovery of an *actual* historical referent behind a Bible story had the ironic effect of divorcing the text from any *spiritual* referent.

Meanwhile, the very act of asking the historical question opened up the possibility that the biblical narratives, for all they might have been *intended* to refer literally, might nevertheless refer wrongly, led astray by a pre-scientific credulity. Or there was the further possibility that they had never been intended to refer to actual people and events at all, but were ‘myths’ (in the sense of instructive fiction) from the very start. In the former case as in the latter, the ‘real’ referent now must be sought ‘behind’ the narrative, whether that real meaning was ‘actual’ or ‘spiritual’ (it could in no way be both). In other words, even if investigation demonstrated that the text did not refer accurately to an actual historical event, the principle of one referent still held. That referent could even be God, provided that God were understood in an abstract and not in a concrete, storied sense. In this way, those committed to the Christian faith managed to preserve a modicum of revelatory content for the Bible. The price, however, was that the biblical narrative had to recede into the background as its ‘true meaning’ became “detachable from the specific story that sets it forth.”¹²

The growth in the eighteenth century of a hermeneutic of universal reason was not accepted uncritically by nineteenth century theologians, who were well aware of the danger posed to faith of this essentially reductionist scheme. Schleiermacher’s innovative response was to shift the hermeneutical debate away from the issue of text

¹¹ Gottfried Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power”, in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. Henry Chadwick, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1956), 53.

¹² Frei, *Eclipse*, 6.

and external referent. Not that he could “return ... to a pre-Kantian stance, for which either knowing or understanding would be a merely isomorphic internal reproduction of given external data”¹³, i.e., an intellectual understanding simply of the sense of the words. Rather, Schleiermacher’s concern was to make a special case of the knowledge of God and so to isolate God from the distorting and/or limiting effects of our perception.

As Schleiermacher explained it, our relation to all other objects is one of “reciprocity”, which word “expresses our connexion with everything which either appeals to our receptivity or is subjected to our activity”.¹⁴ However, when it comes to God, there is no “reciprocity” at all, because we have absolutely no capacity to impinge upon God in any way. Therefore God is absolutely free, and we are absolutely dependent. This means that, while he accepts fully Kant’s point, that subject and object are in a mutually affective relationship, Schleiermacher simply refuses to categorise God as an object. His alternative proposal is that knowledge of God, far from being ‘filtered’ through our perception, is given to us in *immediate* fashion, to be identified directly with that same “feeling of absolute dependence”.

When it comes to the interpretation of texts, Schleiermacher writes that “hermeneutics deals only with the art of understanding, not with the presentation of what has been understood.”¹⁵ The “reciprocity” here is between reader and author, as the reader seeks to understand the consciousness behind the creative act. However, God cannot be regarded in any way as the ‘author’ of the Bible, for that would be to involve God in the dialectical reader-writer relationship, which would contradict the principle of God’s absolute freedom and our absolute dependence. Therefore, as a special epistemological case, Schleiermacher removes God from the biblical narrative, so that scripture now has no revelatory content as such. Rather, the hermeneutical task is now to understand the God-consciousness of the ancient writers and speakers of scripture, particularly Jesus himself. In this way,

¹³ Frei, *Eclipse*, 288.

¹⁴ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 14.

¹⁵ Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, (Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), 96.

Schleiermacher sought to make space within religion for historical biblical criticism by the simple expedient of allowing it to help uncover the God-consciousness of Jesus, but denying it the power either to reveal or obscure the content of God. But the price is a separation between the ‘literal sense’ of the text and God as its purported referent.

3.2 Unity of Events, Genres, and Testaments

The second element in precritical realistic reading was that if the real historical world described by the several biblical stories is a single world of one temporal sequence, there must in principle be one cumulative story to depict it...

The issue of the unity of text and referent is further complicated when the focus is widened to embrace the Bible as a totality. Frei’s comment about “one temporal sequence” begs the question as to how a modern critical awareness of the disparate genres, events, and voices of scripture, can ever allow for their unity under any scheme – and this before we even consider the “one cumulative story” of the Bible as extending in some way to embrace our time and cultures.

The unity of the Bible can be envisaged in a number of related ways, all of which were almost indistinguishable for premodern interpreters. A temporal sequence is one way of unifying disparate stories: a realistic narrative takes place in time and over time, adding event to event as an entire story unfolds in an unbroken chain of cause and effect. Of course, in the case of the Bible, ‘cause’ must also be understood in a divine, cosmic sense and not simply as a natural historical pattern. This conception also implies a *telos*: a climax or denouement towards which the narrative drive is headed, which is accounted for by the theological category of ‘Providence’. A second way of envisaging the unity of scripture is something akin to a collection of short stories, all by different authors, but all writing about the same theme. And a third concept of textual unity lies in the singularity of an author, so that even on a more qualified understanding of the inspiration of scripture, the claim that scripture is the Word of God supplies a kind of authorial unity. All three grounds of the unity of scripture were axiomatic to Luther and Calvin. To them, the entire Bible was a realistic narrative, truly depicting a real world and a real God; and what is more, it was *one* narrative, as befits one God. Indeed, it is the thesis of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*,

that the realistic narrative tradition in western literature owes its very existence to the fierce monotheism of the Judaic tradition.

However, this ‘single world’ of Hebrew scripture was, with the advent of Jesus Christ, given a new interpretative ‘key’ – and a new interpretative problem. Greene-McCreight describes the issue for Christian interpreters as follows:

The plain sense of scripture in Christian reading thus hinges hermeneutically on the problem of the relation of the two testaments, and theologically on the problem of the relation of the covenant with Abraham and the New Covenant made in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁶

Now not only must Jesus Christ be ‘read back’ into the Hebrew scriptures, but so must the Hebrew Scriptures be ‘read forward’ into the New Testament – yet without violating either their integrity or the simplicity of their relation with their more direct referent. The effect of understanding this “second element” of unity in this way is that the “first element” – the unity of text and referent – has become considerably more complex. Clearly, the ‘single referent’ practice of Enlightenment hermeneutics cannot hold here; somehow, an Old Testament account must be read to refer not only to an actual contemporary event, but also to that event’s fulfilment in Jesus Christ, and then yet further, also to our time and world. At this point, the premodern interpreters would invoke the crucial hermeneutical key to the maintenance of the unity of the Bible: the practice of reading scripture *figuratively*.¹⁷ Auerbach offers this useful definition:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfils the first.¹⁸

This principle of figuration lent itself particularly well to premodern biblical interpretation, for the Doctrine of Providence guarantees that any given historical event is no mere accident, but points always to the salvation event that was Jesus.

¹⁶ Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram*, 3.

¹⁷ In the essay, “Figura”, Auerbach explores the development of this technical concept of ‘figuration’, from its first appearance as a Greek and Roman rhetorical or dramatic device, to its application to biblical interpretation from Tertullian and onwards to Augustine. Auerbach points out that *allegoria* and *typus* were frequently used as synonyms for *figura*, not to mention a range of words indicating ‘likeness’ or ‘image’ (48). See Erich Auerbach, “Figura”, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays*, (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1973), 11–76.

¹⁸ Auerbach, “Figura”, 53.

However, as John David Dawson points out, the idea that Jesus can be ‘read back’ into the Hebrew scriptures is a misleading one. Dawson stresses that, for Frei,

Figural reading is essentially a “reading forward” in anticipation, a reading from figure to fulfilment, rather than a retrospective “reading back” that would apply the self-assured certainty of Christian meaning to otherwise vague and uncertain figures of the Hebrew Bible. Instead, the figural reader aims to subordinate him or herself to the text and to follow the emergence of meaning as the biblical narrative unfolds its own, inner directionality from past to present.¹⁹

This observation is entirely in accordance with the point made in Chapter 2, that Frei is arguing for a linear hermeneutic rather than a circular one. Furthermore, a vital connection is made here between such a ‘linear’ reading, and the appropriate attitude of theological humility towards the Hebrew Scriptures: a figural reading can avoid the imposition of an externally-derived interpretative principle which would destroy the historical uniqueness of the promissory events, even while it refers these events forward to Christ. As Auerbach explains with respect to Tertullian’s figurative reading of Joshua:

Thus the naming of Joshua-Jesus is a phenomenon prophecy or prefiguration of the future Saviour; *figura* is something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical.²⁰

So while in one sense, Jesus Christ is a Barthian-style ‘ontological assumption’ in every Christian reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, in Frei’s logic of belief, it is necessary always to read forward, and not back, from promise to cumulative promise and on to fulfilment. That is the only way not to make an abstraction out of the fulfilment – a Christ *apart from* his story. It is also the only way to appreciate fully the story of how that fulfilment came to be, including all the twists and turns along the way. And thirdly, it is the best way to preserve the unity of the text, as each moment of promise builds cumulatively on the one before. (The alternative is to treat them as separate and disconnected witnesses to the fulfilment.) Therefore, for all that such figurative interpretation seems to take imaginative liberties with the text which are impossible to justify under later empirical hermeneutics, Frei argues that a figurative reading is in fact a natural extension of the realistic reading of the Bible, unifying the “accidental truths” of history into one “cumulative” story. Thus

¹⁹ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 142.

²⁰ Auerbach, “Figura”, 29.

figuration moves beyond the restrictive literalism of the single referent reading to, as Frei puts it, “literalism at the level of the whole biblical story”.²¹

However, with the advent of the Enlightenment, this figurative scheme of reading underwent a reversal. In terms of the unity of Scripture, the problem with the ‘single referent’ Enlightenment hermeneutic is that the “cumulative” narrative of the Bible is broken down once again into individual genres, events, and voices. With the loss of God as the referent; with the loss of God as the ‘author’ of scripture; and with the loss of the concept of a providentially-ordered world with a single temporal sequence, there is now nothing to hold all the fragments together. As Frei illustrates in the course of *Eclipse*, the Bible seemed to have lost every one of its principles of unity.

Schleiermacher once again proposes his hermeneutic of understanding as an approach which could ‘solve’ this problem by providing an alternative account of the unity of a text. A true Romantic, he shifts the focus of hermeneutics away from the search for a single ‘external’ referent, and turns the spotlight instead on the task of understanding the ‘inner’ authorial consciousness. Without ceasing to refer to an objective reality (factual or philosophical), *religious* meaning retreats into the subjective. This means that for Schleiermacher, the unity of the text can reside only in the unbroken unity of the author’s consciousness. Schleiermacher’s stated aim as reader is “to understand the text at first as well as and then even better than its author”²² – which task Gadamer calls “the whole problem of hermeneutics”.²³

Yet alongside this affinity, the dialectical otherness of author and reader must still stand. Schleiermacher asserts this ‘unity in duality’ thus:

Because understanding necessarily involves a reversal in one’s dealing with a given discourse, one may speak of heterogeneity between them; because it equally necessarily

²¹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 2.

²² Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, 112.

²³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 192.

involves divination, turning oneself ‘as it were in to the other’, one may speak also of their affinity.²⁴

Not for Schleiermacher the ‘static’ syntheses of the Hegelian scheme. Here, the author and the reader remain separate entities, and creation and understanding remain separate processes, for the reader’s experience is of an essentially different order – an “immediate intellectual act”,²⁵ as opposed to the pre-linguistic experience of the immediate self-consciousness. Understanding, therefore, can never be complete, but is instead a “constant act of approximation”.²⁶ This very dynamic construct of understanding relies absolutely on the unity of the consciousness of the single author.

Perhaps this hermeneutic of understanding could have worked very well indeed in the context of a doctrine of the inspiration of scripture. However, Schleiermacher’s refusal to regard God as an object of knowledge means that he has no such doctrine²⁷, and he is not shy in dismissing most of the Old Testament as irrelevant to faith. Nevertheless, when it comes to the gospels, the centrality of Jesus to the Christian religion, added to the location of revelation in the immediate God-consciousness, meant that Schleiermacher had to find some way of arriving at an understanding of Jesus which was perhaps even better – or at least more intellectual – than his understanding of himself. Jesus is not the author of the gospels, but Schleiermacher finds in the long self-conscious discourses of John’s Gospel²⁸ enough ‘spoken’ material at least to attempt a reconstruction of his consciousness. By comparison, the synoptic gospels, with their rag-tag succession of characters and events, do not lend themselves so easily to a hermeneutic of understanding. Nevertheless the Gospel of John, which Schleiermacher’s own biblical criticism regarded as chronologically earliest²⁹, provides enough material for the reader to

²⁴ Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, 135, 138, as cited in Frei, *Eclipse*, 293.

²⁵ Frei, *Eclipse*, 298.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 294.

²⁷ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre: Two Letters to Dr Lücke*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981). Here, in Christine Helmer’s words, “Schleiermacher wrote that the supernaturalism of orthodox Christology and a pneumatologically inspired Bible could no longer be supported by historical research on the Bible.” See Christine Helmer, “Schleiermacher’s exegetical theology and the New Testament”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Mariña, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 229–47, 231.

²⁸ Frei describes how these discourses were read by Schleiermacher as a “continuous series of self-manifestations”. (*Eclipse*, 311).

²⁹ See Helmer, “Schleiermacher’s exegetical theology”, 244.

work with. And so, for all its limitations, Schleiermacher's hermeneutic of understanding does at least preserve a limited revelatory role for the Bible: not God as such, but Jesus at least, communicates.

However, Gadamer's crucial insight is that where Schleiermacher seems to be talking about *understanding*, he is actually taking *misunderstanding* to be the starting point of communication.³⁰ As Schleiermacher himself wrote:

A more rigorous practice of the art of interpretation ... is based on the assumption that misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point.³¹

In this light, Schleiermacher's hermeneutical method is in fact diametrically opposed to the 'literal sense' of Luther and Calvin, by whom language is assumed to be communicative, and directly at that. Gadamer does appreciate how Schleiermacher had shifted the focus of hermeneutics from referent to understanding; however, in the process he regrets how "the task of interpretation has been uprooted from the context of intelligent consensus" and now has to "overcome complete alienation".³² The result is, as Gadamer writes and as Frei himself cites, "Schleiermacher's problem is not historical obscurity, but the obscurity of the Thou".³³ For all that their concerns are very different, the line of descent from Schleiermacher's hermeneutics of understanding to the existentialism of the mid-20th century is not hard to trace.

Although he ultimately dismisses Schleiermacher's 'solutions', Frei nevertheless reads him more kindly than does Gadamer. Frei understands how in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, the 'I' and the 'Thou' are not hopelessly separated: there is something in between – a text – and this is something they both share. Furthermore, it is possible to widen this commonality to include a world beyond the

³⁰ By contrast, Gadamer considers *understanding* to be the basic assumption of human communication: "Understanding (*Verständnis*) is the first of all agreement (*Einverständnis*). So human beings usually understand one another immediately or they communicate (*sich verständigen*) until they reach an agreement. Reaching an understanding (*Verständigung*) is thus always: reaching an agreement about something." (*Truth and Method*, 158.)

³¹ Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, 110.

³² Hans Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 130.

³³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 191, cited by Frei as "Schleiermacher's problem is not that of a mysterious history, but that of a mysterious Thou". (*Eclipse*, 290.)

writer and reader: the discourse, while it remains “the self-expression of individual, self-developing spirit”³⁴, is simultaneously “an individual focus of a common linguistic and cultural stock”.³⁵ Schleiermacher named these two aspects of discourse the “psychological” (or “technical”) and interestingly, the “grammatical”:

To understand a speech always involves two moments: to understand what is said in the context of the language with its possibilities [grammatical], and to understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker [psychological].³⁶

Once again, here is an instantiation of what we have called the distinction between the grammatical and the ontological. In essence, Gadamer’s criticism focuses on the “psychological” (ontological) aspect of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutical procedure. However, Frei considers that Gadamer overstates this, arguing against his claim that there is a straightforward relation between Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics and his theory of ‘feeling’. By contrast, as Frei reads Schleiermacher, psychological intention is of lesser interest to him than grammatical self-expression, given that the hermeneutics of understanding must of necessity begin with the objective text. Schleiermacher was fully aware that intention behind the work of art, and its ultimate grammatical expression, need not entirely coincide, so that the final structure of the finished work does not in itself constitute the ontological consciousness of the creating subject. Apart from other objections, that would be far too static an account of consciousness for Schleiermacher. Rather, for him the final structure of the text can only be understood as the reader reconstructs its “genesis and development”³⁷; and that reconstruction can only be ventured insofar as the author and reader share a common language. Should the dialogue proceed to full understanding (an unlikely event), this is nevertheless full understanding only of the initial pre-linguistic consciousness behind the author’s impulse to create, and not of the authorial Subject in itself. Thus Schleiermacher refuses the Hegelian route of positing an ultimate ‘union’ of the dialectical opposites: for him, Subject and Subject remain inviolably other.

³⁴ Frei, *Eclipse*, 292.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 291–2.

³⁶ Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, 98.

³⁷ Frei, *Eclipse*, 301.

Frei's concern then, *contra* Gadamer, is to restore grammatical understanding to its rightful centrality in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. If, like Gadamer, we emphasise the psychological aspect over the linguistic, then we do indeed perceive only subjectivism.³⁸ However, Schleiermacher's hermeneutic is linguistically *grounded*: it exists within in the context of language in general, which aspect provides an objective foundation to the hermeneutic as a whole. Indeed, once an 'intention' has been linguistically expressed, even the author cannot now psychologically 'locate' that pre-linguistic intention without at least first 'reconstructing' it through the given linguistic channels. As Frei puts it, with his usual attention to the logic of belief, "there is no technical understanding without grammatical understanding"³⁹, and in that order.

Schleiermacher's hermeneutic, then, is a general hermeneutic only in a very specific sense. It does not believe in a universal 'meaning' which can be abstracted from the text, for if the 'meaning' is the consciousness of the author, then that 'meaning' must at least be as heterogeneous as the number of people who have ever written. Moreover, the 'meaning' of the text is not the author's consciousness in general, but their consciousness only in the specific act of creating that text. Neither is Schleiermacher's hermeneutic predicated on a universal system, for such a 'subject matter' as the individual human spirit can hardly be amenable in every instance to the same structured analysis, particularly given the very imprecise fit between authorial intention and finished form. Indeed, Schleiermacher is adamant that there are no stateable 'rules' which can be followed in every instance of reading:

In order to complete the grammatical side of interpretation it would be necessary to have a complete knowledge of the language. In order to complete the psychological side it would be necessary to have a complete knowledge of the person. Since in both cases such complete knowledge is impossible, it is necessary to move back and forth between the grammatical and psychological sides, and no rules can stipulate exactly how to do this.⁴⁰

³⁸ See Frei, *Eclipse*, 294.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 293.

⁴⁰ Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, 100. Cited in Frei, *Eclipse*, 292, as follows: "If the grammatical aspect were to be completed for itself alone, there would have to be a complete knowledge of the language, and in the other case [the technical] a complete knowledge of the person. Since both can never be given, one must always pass from the one to the other; and for the way to do this there can be no rules."

The very fluidity of the dialectic ultimately renders hermeneutical rules impossible. In Schleiermacher's hermeneutic of understanding, both life and language (and "language to Schleiermacher is something like a form of life..."⁴¹) are a *process*, without beginning or end where they might stand still and be systematised. Rather, Schleiermacher presents his hermeneutics of understanding as a universal *method*, which can be applied to all texts, but which allows room for heterogeneity of meaning and form. Certainly one can question – as Frei did, and Barth before him – whether there can be any legitimate universal method that can be applied to poetry as to cookbooks, but that is a different question to the one about universal content or form. In short, and whatever his limitations, Schleiermacher had identified accurately the problems with the dominant Enlightenment hermeneutic, and in his attempts at answering them did suggest to Frei some useful lines of thought.

3.3 Unity of History Past and Historical Present

In the third place, since the world truly rendered by combining biblical narratives into one was indeed the one and only real world, it must in principle embrace the experience of any present age and reader.

As the theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries found, the question of the meaning of a text becomes particularly urgent when it comes to the applicative sense of the Bible. It may well be historical fact that the Hebrews slaves walked out of Egypt; that the Babylonians took the Jews into exile; that a man called Jesus died on a cross – but what meaning can such facts have for us in our present historical moment? Indeed, how can any accident of history have a meaning for us, especially when that 'fact' is the single allowed referent of the text? And as for those passages of scripture which are mythical or allegorical, how is the meaning which is *their* referent to be turned into meaning *for us* in our very different cultural context?

These questions about the historical and the applicative sense of the Bible – and the gap between them – had returned with force in Frei's own time, particularly in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann.⁴² However, Frei notes that there was no such issue for

⁴¹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 293.

⁴² Bultmann's 'demythologising' approach to scripture, and his search for an account of the relevance of the 'myths' of scripture in our time, will be considered in detail in Chapter 5.

precritical biblical hermeneutics. Then, as Frei argues in his first chapter and restates at the end of *Eclipse*, “the temporal perspective mattered little”⁴³: the overarching narrative of Scripture underpinned by a literal figurative reading could with ease be extended yet further into our own time and place. Indeed, figuration is one of the premises which makes preaching possible, for it underpins the faith that the historical biblical text is also speaking about us in our time, and that we exist within the world delineated by the Bible. As Lindbeck was later to put it, “A scriptural world is ... able to absorb the universe”.⁴⁴

Luther’s notion of the perspicuity of scripture is therefore no naïve reading, but is based on the perceived unity of God’s providentially-ordered world. That is why Luther understands the Bible as *sui ipsius interpret*⁴⁵, needing no hermeneutic from outside its own canon – precisely because there *is* no world outside its own canon. Rather, in his view, as expressed by Gadamer, scripture has “a univocal sense that can be derived from the text: the *sensus literalis*”.⁴⁶ True, Gadamer contends that Luther’s reading of scripture is not so hermeneutically neutral as it appears, relying as it does on an understanding of scripture as a ‘unity’: a “postulate that is in itself based on a dogma”, or on dogmas, as we have seen. Indeed, in a criticism that is very pertinent to Frei, Gadamer argues that “the literary and hermeneutical principle of understanding texts in their own terms is ... itself unsatisfactory and always in need of support from a generally unacknowledged dogmatic guideline”.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, as Frei understands Luther, he is not so much as denying the existence of a hermeneutical lens, as maintaining that any such lens which does exist is nevertheless working from *within* the world encompassed by scripture: in short, from ‘within faith’. The ‘neutrality’ of the *sensus literalis*, or of the realistic narrative hermeneutic, at least understands itself as a conditioned neutrality, as opposed to the unbounded ‘neutrality’ of universal reason.

⁴³ Frei, *Eclipse*, 304.

⁴⁴ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 117.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 176

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 175.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 176.

As discussed above, the Enlightenment ‘single referent’ hermeneutic effectively abolished figurative interpretation. Now, the contemporary world was no longer understood as being encompassed by God’s grand providential narrative; rather, the present historical moment was apprehended as entirely separate from the historical moments described in scripture. Indeed, in the aftermath of Hume’s empiricism, philosophers struggled to maintain the links of even *natural* chains of cause-and-effect: fact was isolated from fact as surely as present was isolated from past. Then, in a further step, the present historical moment was turned on the narratives of the past and used to judge their veracity. Under the pressure of such questioning, the ‘grand narrative’ of God’s providence had little chance of survival: hence the ‘ditch’ which had grown between the historical past and the present historical moment, and the struggle of theologians ever since to overcome it.

Where Strauss had worried about the historical gap between the writers of scripture and the modern reader⁴⁸, Schleiermacher was closer to his Reformed tradition in regarding the modern reader as at no significant disadvantage: indeed, Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic, in which “the original and the interpreter – are directly ... present to each other”⁴⁹, is expressly designed to leap the ditch of history. Furthermore, his insistence on treating the text as a work of art complete in itself avoided Strauss’ exegetical dissection of the whole of scripture into virtually unrelated parts; while his location of ‘meaning’ in the consciousness of the author means that an individual text has an inherent unity, even if the method falls down when it came to the heterogeneity of the Bible. As a result, Schleiermacher’s solution to the hermeneutical problem is not entirely uncongenial to Frei. However, the test of any biblical hermeneutic will be exegesis: and it is here that Frei judges that Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic of understanding actually completes with a final flourish the ‘eclipse’ of biblical narrative.

⁴⁸ “A people, a religious community, finds itself in a certain condition or round of institutions of which the spirit, the idea, lives and acts within it. But the mind, following a natural impulse, desires to gain a complete representation of that existing condition, and to know its origin. This origin however is buried in oblivion, or is too indistinctly discernible to satisfy present ideas and feelings. Consequently an image of that origin, coloured by the light of existing ideas, is cast upon the dark wall of the past, which image is however but a magnified reflex of existing influences.” Strauss, *The Life of Jesus*, 62.

⁴⁹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 290.

3.4 Frei in Dialogue with Schleiermacher

Frei's problem with Schleiermacher is that the search for Jesus' 'inner' consciousness effectively nullifies the importance of the 'outer' events of his life story.⁵⁰ This tendency did not worry Schleiermacher himself, for if "narrative continuity lies in consciousness"⁵¹, then it absolutely does *not* lie in the external world. Frei's insight is that while Schleiermacher's hermeneutic can account for character (just!), it cannot begin to account for incident; nor for interaction with other characters; and nor can it account for the social context within which and against which the individual is defined. The immediate practical result is that the true content of the biblical narratives "has to be discovered at a level more remote" than the interaction of character and incident. As with a rationalist single-referent hermeneutic, so is it also with a hermeneutic of understanding, that "the documents mean something other than what they say".⁵²

The process of the eclipsing of the biblical narrative did not, of course, end with Schleiermacher. By Herrmann's time, the epistemological 'enemies' of revelation were the Neo-Kantians⁵³, who took Kant a step further and argued that there is in fact nothing given to thought which is not at the same time the creation of thought. Herrmann accepted this as axiomatic, but once again was obliged to isolate the knowledge of God and make it a special case. The result was, in what McCormack terms an "existentialized Schleiermacherianism"⁵⁴, Herrmann rejected altogether both objective doctrine and the phenomenological world as sources of the knowledge of God, and argued instead that such knowledge could only come from the subjective encounter:

The power of the Gospel can never be effectual in its working, while people are so insincere as to propose "to appropriate by faith" the ideas contained therein. The ideas are always so shaped that their truth is obvious to those alone who in their inward being experience a great

⁵⁰ A fuller analysis of the effect of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic on his biblical exegesis of the life of Jesus will be conducted in Chapter 4. See pages 162–6.

⁵¹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 311.

⁵² *Ibid.* 318.

⁵³ Proponents of Neo-Kantianism included Paul Natorp and Hermann Cohen, both based at Marburg. For a fuller description of their influence on 19th century theology, see McCormack, *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 42ff.

⁵⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, "Revelation and History in Transfoundationalist Perspective", *Orthodox and Modern*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 21–39, 28.

transformation. The very conception of God as the Almighty Father is true only when it expresses this kind of experience.⁵⁵

Revelation, therefore, could never be an objective event, even in the diluted Schleiermacherian sense of an impression being made on our consciousness. Now, only the inner life of Jesus could reveal anything, because only the subjective has independent reality. The result was even more drastic than Schleiermacher's semi-objective account, in which what Jesus said and did could at least be read as an outworking of his inner consciousness. Now, as McCormack puts it, Herrmann effectively "drove a wedge between the inner life of Jesus ... and his teaching and works".⁵⁶ This development meant that revelation lost any notion of objective content at all, and became merely the subjective, experiential, and non-objectifiable encounter with God. However, where Herrmann saw only the inner life of *Jesus* as revelatory, for the 20th century existentialist theologians, committed to the dialectic, the location of revelation was transferred to the inner life of the *individual* in their encounter with God. Thus, by Frei's time, this "existentialized Schleiermacherianism" had grown into the full-blown existentialist account.

Once again, as Frei sees it, this denial of any concrete content to the knowledge of God is the inevitable outcome of a logic of belief which begins with the separation of meaning from text. His own realistic narrative hermeneutic is therefore designed to counter this separation, and the inevitable abstraction of God which accompanies it. In his linear and cumulative scheme, meaning cannot be read 'backwards', as situated somewhere behind and ontologically prior to the text, after the discernment of which the text can safely be discarded. Not only would this be an abstraction, but it would also be a logical nonsense, for without the text, there would be no meaning to discern, and meaning cannot exist on some metaphysical plain, independent of its public expression. Grammatically, we are obliged to say things in a certain order – so in strict *grammatical* logic, being precedes action, ontology precedes epistemology, just as the subject precedes the predicate. But this necessary grammatical ordering should not be loaded with too much ontological significance in

⁵⁵ Wilhelm Herrmann, "The Sense in which the Gospel Becomes a Real Power", in Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann, *Essays on The Social Gospel*, (London: Williams and Norgate, 1907), 145–53, 147.

⁵⁶ McCormack, "Revelation and History", 27.

itself. Frei's point is that, while ontology and grammatical logic should be distinguished, the ontology and the epistemology should not be, even though grammar lines them up in a certain order. Just as the *deus* cannot be separated from the *dixit*, so meaning cannot be separated from the text. This is because the means by which we know is essential to the nature of the object of our knowledge, just as speaking is essential to the nature of God.

The constantly reinforced thesis of *Eclipse* is that the meaning of the gospels is absolutely inherent in the story, and can neither be extracted, nor translated into non-storied terms. Indeed, compared to the richness of the interactions of characters and events, a mere restatement of themes is flat in the extreme. We are therefore drawn back to Frei's 'figural' understanding of scripture, in which the text can refer *at the same time* to an actual historical event, a spiritual lesson for those caught up in that event, the fulfilment of an earlier prophecy, an event yet to happen, the culture in which we live now, a spiritual meaning for us who read the text now, *and* an eschatological promise – and all that and more without any strain on the unity of the text. And this is precisely why Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic is so vital a starting point in the logic of belief, for a realistic narrative can bind all these elements together with ease, in the way that a myth, or a spiritual biography, or a series of propositional statements, simply cannot. Form criticism despite, a figurative scheme can even bind together the four disparate gospel accounts, so that without any attempt at synthesis, they can be held in tension: four narratives about one person, the cumulative story of Jesus Christ. The centrality of this notion of figuration to Frei's theological 'system' cannot be overstated, and as will be seen in the following section, this same principle, which underpin the unity of scripture, underpins also the crucial unity of the self, the individual personal being.

4. Figuration as the Principle of the Unity of the Person

4.1 The Unity of the ‘Outer’ and ‘Inner’ Self

Where *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* was concerned with issues surrounding the unity of scripture, in his ‘follow-up’ book, Frei effectively extends this principle of unity to the person of Jesus Christ. The thesis of the long essay, “Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus’ Death and Resurrection”, and of its fuller statement in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, is that as with the biblical text, so with the individual person: that there can be no separation of ‘outer’ form and ‘inner’ content. Accordingly, Frei posits two possible schemes of identity-description derived in part from Gilbert Ryle: that of “intention-action description”⁵⁷, and that of “self-manifestation”.⁵⁸ The former is more directly opposed to the existentialist account than the latter, but both are essential components of the concept of the unity of a self. As it happens, “intention-action description” more neatly corresponds with this first principle of figuration, the unity of ‘outer’ and ‘inner’, where “self-manifestation” will be better considered below, under the second principle.

Where existentialism would locate true identity in the ‘inner’ self, Frei follows Ryle in his direct relation of a person’s intentions and actions, so that a person’s identity cannot be divorced from its outward, physical expression. The body is, in fact, the “link”⁵⁹ between the individual’s ‘consciousness’ and the public world of contingent events. There is no “ghost” inside the person which can be separated from the dead “machine” which is the body. Quite the contrary: what we do physically and externally is entirely constitutive of who we are. Frei cites Ryle with approval:

“To perform intelligently,” says Gilbert Ryle quite correctly, “is to do one thing and not two things” Hence, each has to be described by reference to the other. An intention is nothing more than an implicit action; but to say this is not to make intention and action one and the same ... Their unity, we can only repeat, is in the *irreversible passage* or movement from one to the other, from intention to action.⁶⁰

Again, the issue is one of logic. While intention and action are in effect a unity, yet given that we cannot say everything at once, the question becomes in what logical

⁵⁷ See Frei, *Identity*, 145–55.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 164–73.

⁵⁹ Frei, *Theological Reflections*, 18.

⁶⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 137, citing Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 40. (my italics)

order we should say them. Here, Frei insists that the logical order must be intention first, and then action. Of course, for human beings as opposed to God, not every intention works its way out as an action. However, such an unenacted intention remains an abstraction, and is of no consequence to a person's identity:

An intention, unless impeded or frustrated, is no intention and has no mental status at all except as a plan to be executed. The expression "I intend" is rightly and logically followed by a verb, i.e., an action word.⁶¹

However, what we *can* posit is that every action was intended. This means that, in answer to the question 'What is (s)he like?', we are able to point to a person's actions and thus truly describe him or her, assuming that, in and with their action, we are also given their intention: "Enactment does not merely illustrate, but constitutes, intention."⁶² To illustrate: if in answer to the question, 'What is she like?', we reply, 'She is cruel to animals', we can assume that any such cruelty was intentional. Hence 'cruelty to animals' becomes constitutive of her identity. But what we *cannot* do is extrapolate 'backwards' from an action to an intention which was prior to and independent of the action, and possibly even different to the action which resulted: "In that case," Frei points out, "the intention or decision to act would account for everything, the actual enactment for nothing."⁶³ In other words, 'cruel to animals' would become a statement of the *essence* of a person, *even if they had never been cruel to any animal*. This principle of logical ordering is parallel to the hermeneutical principle, that we cannot extrapolate back from a story, to a prior and independent 'meaning'. Rather, just as the meaning is given inextricably with the story, so too the intention is given inextricably with the action.

So when it comes to the identity of Jesus Christ, whenever Jesus was 'active', then that action must be recognised as a concrete outworking of an inner intention. Therefore, under this category of 'intention-action description', it is impossible to go looking for the inner life of Jesus as located somewhere *behind* his actions. Nor do Jesus' words and actions act as some kind of conduit through which we can perceive his true inner self, which, having been perceived, means that we can now dispense with the outer form. There is no such passage from action to intention, just as there

⁶¹ Frei, *Identity*, 136.

⁶² *Ibid.* 151.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 137.

is no such passage from external text to inner meaning. Rather, it is better to think of a direct relationship, in which Jesus' identity is *constituted by* his public actions – just as in parallel fashion, the meaning of a realistic narrative is constituted by the characters and events it describes.

Thus it is that Frei can locate Jesus' *core* intention as always “to enact the good of men on their behalf – or their salvation – in perfect obedience to God”.⁶⁴ This is because, of all his intentions, obedience is the most ‘objective’. By that I mean that obedience is grammatically transitive, always focussed outwards; therefore it can in no wise be conceived as an abstract quality, for in order to qualify as obedience, it must be obedience *to* somebody. Hence it must be constituted (and not merely illustrated) by an external act. In other words, the intention to be obedient is meaningless without the actual act of obedience. This is true of other intentions besides obedience – Frei cites faith and love as examples of ‘transitive’ personal qualities, which must have an external referent: faith *in* something, love *for* someone. Nevertheless, faith and love are both vulnerable to abstraction from their referent, so that they become more of a “spiritual characteristic”, where the issue becomes “not that to which faith refers but the quality of the person’s faith itself”.⁶⁵ However, it is much harder to abstract obedience, either from its referent, or from the action which constitutes it. Therefore, Jesus’ obedience “exists solely as a counterpart to his being sent and has God for its indispensable point of reference. Jesus’ very identity involves the will and purpose of the Father who sent him”.⁶⁶

Later, in Chapter 4, we will again consider the relation between Jesus’ identity and his obedience to the will of God. For the time being, however, it is interesting to note that the terminology Frei uses to describe the intention (not the quality) of obedience echoes which he understanding of the function of the biblical text:

The *referent* of Jesus’ obedience is the will of God and his purpose, which becomes embodied in the climactic events of Jesus’ self-enactment. The *content* or meaning of that

⁶⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 145.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 149.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

obedience is the pattern of merciful, saving activity drawn largely from the picture of the obedient, righteous servant in Deutero-Isaiah. It is a pattern of exchange.⁶⁷

Once again, the issue is of referent and content. The enacted intention ‘obedience’, like the text, has its ‘referent’ built in to its very form. The referent of the biblical text is God; the referent of Jesus’ enacted intention is God. Therefore, as God is known in and through the stories of scripture, so God is known in and through Jesus’ obedience. Both are revelatory of the content of God. Moreover, the obedience of Jesus cannot be abstracted from the stories of scripture; otherwise it could be envisioned as, for example, the obedience of a soldier to a superior officer, or the obedience of a small child to its parent. But if the referent of Jesus’ obedience is God, how might we then describe the content of God? How does the particular obedience of Jesus Christ to God manifest itself in practice, and what language can we use to describe it?

Frei relates the obedience of Jesus to the content of God, first of all by means of a figurative reading of the Old Testament witness, which Jesus invokes to describe his mission.⁶⁸ According to this textual witness, the content of this obedience is Jesus’ saving activity, which is the same as the saving activity of God. But even more specifically, the content of Jesus’ obedience is manifested in the narrative of the passion and crucifixion:

It is in the connected narrative sequence of the last events of the Gospel story that we look for the coincidence of Jesus’ obedience to God and his love toward men, which is the content of that obedience.⁶⁹

In other words, just as the content (or ‘meaning’) of scripture must be described in storied form, so the content of Jesus’ intention to enact our salvation in obedience to God must be described with reference to what Jesus actually does and says. The key, once again, is the figurative concept of unity, and “the most striking instance of that unity of [outer] obedience and [inner] love comes precisely in the process of his identification in the enactment of his intention”.⁷⁰ Jesus’ “love towards men” is therefore no abstract feeling or quality, but can only be conceptualised by means of a

⁶⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 152.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Luke 4: 16b–21.

⁶⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 152.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* (my parenthesis)

redescription of the events of the passion and resurrection. And again, if the referent of Jesus' obedience is God, then we can truly describe the content of God in terms of what that obedience shows forth: in other words, the content of God is that self-same "love towards men" That is why it is only when we look at the event of the cross that we can say of Jesus, "Here he was most of all himself";⁷¹ because here the content of God is most manifested in him. In Chapter 4 we will consider the co-identity of Jesus and God with reference particularly to the resurrection. However, the enacted intention of obedience throughout Jesus' earthly ministry suggests that we need not wait until the resurrection before we can posit this co-identity.

This principle of the "enacted intention" emphasises once more that for Frei, there can be no separation between subject and predicate beyond the logical need to describe their relation in a certain order. There can be no actual separation of *deus* and *dixit*, for it belongs to the being of God to reveal. There can be no actual separation of inner meaning and outer text, for the meaning is constituted by the text. There can be no actual separation of inner self and outer actions, for the content of a person's identity is constituted by their enacted intentions. And finally and above all, there can be no actual separation of *who Jesus is* and *what Jesus did*, precisely because *who Jesus is*, is entirely constituted by *what Jesus did*.

4.2 One Person, One Cumulative Story

In the intention-action account of identity, thus far Jesus comes across as very much in control, just as he does in the Gospel of John. He is the subject who intends and acts and "governs his predicates".⁷² However, a human body exists in a contingent world, and as Schleiermacher himself recognised, this means that it is "dependent", subject to all sorts of outside forces. If the intention-action description works for a person's conscious and elective acts, this is because there is a single subject who is holding all these disparate predicates in a unity. The problem, however, is how to maintain that unity when the subject is not acting; when, in fact, the subject is being acted *upon*. Frei's intention-action identity description works very well for an

⁷¹ Frei, "Theological Reflections", 12.

⁷² Frei, *Types*, 83.

account of a powerful Subject God who is entirely free. However, the question for the absolutely dependent *human* subject is how to unify not only what they do, but also what is done to them, in one single identity. And when that human subject is in some way also the revelation of the powerful Subject God, the problem is redoubled.

In order to deal with this second aspect of identity, Frei brings in another descriptive category, that of “self-manifestation”. In “Theological Reflections” Frei prefers the term, the “Ascriptive Subject”,⁷³ which he defines as a person’s “ongoing, open-ended persistence in continuity with himself”.⁷⁴ The Ascriptive Subject is the “elusive”,⁷⁵ yet “persistent”,⁷⁶ and “ultimate”,⁷⁷ identity which links together what would otherwise be entirely separate and even contradictory. Indeed, such an identity has its beginnings long before a person is even born, and persists after their death, both in terms of lasting impact on this world, and in terms of life in eternity. So once again, Frei’s realistic narrative scheme is employed to hold in unity what a person does with what is done to them – or in Schleiermacher’s terms, their “freedom” and their “dependence”. We have already seen how a *story* can hold together diverse events and persons, figuratively linking past, present, and future in a way which defies rational explanation. In the same way, diverse events, relationships, memories, intentions, actions, passions, words, feelings, and social, historical and familial identities, can be held together and interpreted as meaningful, not in any rational scheme of being, but only in the being of a *person*. In view of such complexity, it is impossible to explain in any abstract sense exactly who a person is in their inner being. Rather, a person can only be described in concrete, storied, content-full terms.

⁷³ Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 20.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 22.

⁷⁵ By which Frei means the self which can never reflect on the self as the self is reflecting. See Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 20.

⁷⁶ “The intenderactor knows perfectly well ... that he is anterior to that beginning and subsequent to that end (of any intended action).” Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 21.

⁷⁷ “States and qualities are predicated of it; but it is itself unpredicable of anything else.” Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 20.

Frei's account of identity here is entirely applicable to the person of Jesus Christ.⁷⁸ Jesus not only acted out his intentions in powerful, godly freedom; he was also very much subject to the contingent forces of this world, and from his arrest to his death, entirely powerless before them. Frei, however, is able to interpret this paradoxical mixture of power and powerlessness in Jesus as constituent of this same self-manifested identity: once again, apparent contradictions can be held together by a *person*, where logically they can only fall apart. Gethsemane, for example – an event in the synoptics but not in John – Frei reads as the moment when Jesus surrendered what was left of his power to act intentionally, and intentionally resolved *not* to act: resolved, in fact, to be helpless in accordance with his continued intention to enact our good in obedience to God.⁷⁹ This power to be powerless – this ability to enact our good by not acting – is a tension which is fully evident on the cross: Frei points out the irony of the 'saviour' who 'cannot save himself', commenting upon the unwitting aptness of the crowd's taunt.⁸⁰

In summary, the identity of Jesus (or of any other person) can be described by reference to a two-fold scheme of intended actions and self-manifestation. Or rather, not so much a two-fold scheme, as a *unity*, in which what he did and what was done to him are equally inseparable from who he was. However, it would be true to say that the person of Jesus Christ has more 'baggage' attached to his identity than perhaps anyone else in history, not least because there seems to be more than one sphere of existence going on. In this, Frei's conception of identity is very similar indeed to the Chalcedonian formula.⁸¹ Early church attempts to define how Jesus' humanity and divinity might co-exist found themselves obliged to state that they co-existed in his *person*, and only there. This personal and storied unity of two such rationally contradictory 'identities' is of a different order entirely from Donald

⁷⁸ This is no 'universal hermeneutic': a person's identity is as unique as their individual story, and so can only be described in strictly particular and *ad hoc* terms.

⁷⁹ See Frei, *Identity*, 151, 154.

⁸⁰ See *Ibid.* 153.

⁸¹ Similar, but not the same. Frei is in no way making a direct link between 'inner' and 'divine', or 'outer' and 'human'. They are two entirely different sets of concepts: it is simply that the methodology of unifying them in one 'person' is similar.

Baillie's conception of "paradox".⁸² Any paradox which exists is logical merely, and not ontological, for whatever the grammatical contradictions in the Chalcedonian formula, there is no contradiction in the person of Christ. Moreover, the ontological actuality corresponding to Chalcedon's very minimal grammatical description of "fully divine, fully human, two natures in one person, without confusion or change, separation or division", while resisting philosophical conceptualisation, can nevertheless be truly described. Frei concludes, then, that it is only as a storied person that Jesus can hold in tension and unity his vast array of names, expectations, roles, events, and even his own two natures – and all this without strain or contradiction.

However, this is not to say that even this 'literal reading' of his identity renders Jesus entirely transparent. As Auerbach pointed out, a world in which God is dialectically Other has given rise to a literary genre in which mystery is the rule and the norm. The realistic narrative genre of much of the Bible is characterised by

the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and "fraught with background."⁸³

If this is true of the realistic narrative, then it is also true of the person: Frei has explained how, because a person's actions and passions truly render their identity, there is no need to go searching behind such available phenomena for their 'inner' self. However, this means that there can never be absolute knowledge of any person, for although we can describe their intended actions as we see them, we can never go behind these actions to every motivation, every fear or desire, every option which was considered then rejected. Similarly, while what happens to a person becomes constitutive of their identity, we do not have access to their every reaction or emotion. As in the realistic narrative, so in the person: there are *silences*. These silences are of vital importance to the genre of the realistic narrative, for they ensure that we are presented, not with the smooth "externalised, uniformly illuminated

⁸² See Donald Baillie, *God was in Christ: An essay on incarnation and atonement*, (London : Faber, 1955).

⁸³ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 11–12.

phenomena ... connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground”⁸⁴, as Auerbach describes Greek classical literature, but with the realistic ‘multilayeredness’ of a particular event. In the same way, the silences in a person are precisely what make them a unique and “unsubstitutable”⁸⁵ individual, one who combines “the simultaneous existence of various layers of consciousness and the conflict between them”.⁸⁶ That an “elusive” person can be adequately if indirectly described – that they can accurately be identified through a realistic narration of their life story – does not mean that we can equate that identity without remainder with their ontological actuality. The mystery of the individual human being can never be eliminated, and to an even greater degree, nor can the mystery of the infinite divine. This principle is a vital counterbalance to Frei’s search for a concrete ‘content’ to God. God has given the whole of God’s self to us in revelation, but that whole includes mystery.

Frei is not saying, therefore, that Jesus has no ‘inner self’ – that he has no private thoughts, no unspoken desires. Far from it. It is simply that his inner self is not accessible to us in its entirety. His identity, however, is accessible, as long as that identity is correctly understood as descriptive rather than explanatory. Having outlawed Schleiermacher’s reconstructive hermeneutic, and having forbidden any extrapolation from action to intention, Frei is particularly critical of 19th century attempts to do just that:

The task of writing a life of Jesus, especially one including as its pivotal point his ‘inner’ life, is difficult if not impossible – whether it is undertaken as a reconstruction from recorded data or by entering by imaginative reiteration into his self-understanding, or both.⁸⁷

But if we cannot describe the inner self of Jesus, we can at least describe his self-manifestations and intended actions in the world, and thereby can truly describe *who he is* and *what he is like*. Identity description, therefore, cannot be isolated from the narrative in which Jesus is named, active, and acted upon.

⁸⁴ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 11.

⁸⁵ The term is key to Frei’s realistic narrative hermeneutic, from the first page of “Theological Reflections”.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 13.

⁸⁷ Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 34.

5. Theological Grammar and Ontology

5.1 The Medium is not the Thing

With the transition from *Eclipse* to *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei did something remarkable. By putting Auerbach's understanding of figuration as the principle of unity of the biblical text side by side with Ryle's conception of the unity of the embodied self, Frei was able to transfer his textual realistic narrative hermeneutic across to a kind of hermeneutic of human being. Applying these same hermeneutical principles which he developed in his realistic narrative hermeneutic to the person of Jesus, this means that the identity of Jesus Christ cannot be read as existing somewhere behind and ontologically prior to his intended actions as are narrated in the gospels. Logically, we are of course obliged to speak first of a person whom we identify as Jesus of Nazareth, and then of what he said and did. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to see the relation between his identity and his actions as being ontologically identical to that grammatical ordering: just because his identity must be posited before his actions, that does not mean that his identity *existed* before his actions. Rather, the 'public' events of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, as narrated in story-form, *constitute* his identity. This is the leap, aided by Gilbert Ryle, which Frei makes from a textual to a personal hermeneutic, and which becomes the central thesis in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*.

This leap, however, is open to misinterpretation. Emphatically, what Frei is *not* saying, is that the *being* of Jesus is constituted by the text: just as Barth rejected "any confusion of revelation with the medium in which it veils itself"⁸⁸, so too Frei is insistent that the 'medium' is not *die Sache*.⁸⁹ This is the locus of Francesca Murphy's criticism, that Frei has 'textualised' Jesus' identity to such an extent that the real existence of the historical Jesus of Nazareth has become an irrelevance: the

⁸⁸ McCormack, *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 352.

⁸⁹ "The medium of revelation is not the revelation. Jesus of Nazareth, a historical figure, standing on the plane of history, is not the revelation. He is the medium of revelation." McCormack, *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 250.

text has the power to ‘produce’ Jesus simply upon reading. Kay has made a similar error, commenting critically on Frei, that

to assign to any creaturely form—including a literary genre—the power to render revelation, or the divine Presence, confuses the Creator and the creature, substituting hermeneutics for the Holy Spirit.⁹⁰

However, both Murphy and Kay have misread Frei on this point. It is true that for Frei, Jesus’ identity is given in and with its grammatical expression in storied form, but he does not load this medium in itself with too much by way of ontological significance. *Of course* the being who was the historical person Jesus of Nazareth is logically prior to any story that was later told or written down about him. As Frei clarifies in a later essay:

“Historicity” is finally neither reference to specific events, nor a pattern in specific stories; it is their ingredience in or unity with the logically prior general condition of self as consciousness within a diachronic frame, which stories – indispensable but logically subsequent – then bring to expression.⁹¹

However, this is a grammatical rather than an ontological point. The fact is that the ontologically prior Jesus is entirely inaccessible to us: what we know of him, we know only in and with his story. Therefore, to posit the subject as prior to its predicate is to start with an ontological abstraction, even if that abstraction once had a fleshly reality. Nevertheless, Frei does not reverse the grammatical logic: he has emphasised time and time again that the predicate cannot work backwards to ‘produce’ the subject God, or revelation, or the presence of Jesus Christ, or any reality in itself. Indeed, the story’s ability to render Jesus’ identity is utterly dependent on his ontological actuality: the unity of text and referent is maintained precisely *because* the identity of Jesus Christ is entirely consistent with his historical actuality then and now. Remove his historical actuality from the picture, as Murphy thinks Frei has done, then all that is left is pure fiction, and no presence at all. And given that Frei spends an entire chapter explaining why Christ-figures in fiction can never replicate the unique and unsubstitutable identity of the real person who is Jesus Christ⁹², a fictional identity is no revelation and no presence.

⁹⁰ James F. Kay, “Review: Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology*”, in *Theology Today* 56 (1999): 403–405, 404.

⁹¹ Hans W. Frei, “The “Literal Reading” of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?”, in Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 117–52, 129.

⁹² See Frei, *Identity*, 115–22.

5.2 Current Debates

This problem of the relation between ontological and grammatical logic continues to be a very live issue in christology and in Trinitarian theology. The debate goes back to Barth's publication of *Church Dogmatics 2:2* on the doctrine of election, and in its current form owes much to Jüngel's proposal that God should be conceptualised as "being-in-becoming". The issue was revived by the publication of "Grace and Being", Bruce McCormack's contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, and the key argument is now over the relation between the incarnate and the eternal Son – the *Logos ensarkos* and the *Logos asarkos* – in Barth's doctrine of election.

In "Grace and Being", McCormack writes, "If now Barth wishes to speak of "Jesus Christ" as the Subject of election, he must deny to the Logos a mode of state or being above and prior to the eternal decision to be incarnate in time".⁹³ In this way McCormack distinguishes Barth's doctrine of election from that of the classic reformed theologians, who understood the Son, or Logos, as eternally pre-existing the decision to elect. However, as McCormack points out, this means that "the identity of this Logos is, in fact, *already established* prior to the eternal act of Self-determination by means of which the Logos *became* the *Logos incarnandus*."⁹⁴ And if all this were true, then the decision to assume flesh in time could result only in something being added to that already complete identity – an addition which has no effect upon what he is essentially."⁹⁵ McCormack's point is that if God is indeed "being in becoming", or "being in action"⁹⁶, then the eternal Son, or *Logos asarkos*, cannot be posited as ontologically *prior* to his decision to be the *Logos ensarkos*. McCormack is arguing here along lines which would be recognisable to Frei, that there is no 'essence' or 'real God' behind God's acts in revelation: God's intentions are given in and with God's actions, and these intended actions, as predicates,

⁹³ McCormack, *Grace and Being*, 186.

⁹⁴ That is, the *Logos* prior to but 'in waiting for' the incarnation.

⁹⁵ McCormack, *Grace and Being*, 188.

⁹⁶ Cf. the title of Paul Nimmo's book on Barth's "ethical vision". Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision*, (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2007). The front cover cites an enthusiastic endorsement from Bruce McCormack.

constitute God's identity as Subject. He then extends this principle in a subsequent essay:

... the actualism which had always governed Barth's talk of the divine act of relating to the human had now been pressed back into the very being of God. To put the matter as sharply as possible: God *is* in himself, in eternity, the mode of his Self-revelation in time – God as Jesus Christ in eternity and God as Jesus Christ in time – thus guaranteeing that the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity will be identical in content.⁹⁷

The argument of this side of the debate is so far entirely in line with Frei's thesis, that ontology and epistemology cannot be separated in actuality, for all that in strict grammatical logic, the former must be posited first.

However, the opposing argument objects that, even with Barth, this 'actualistic' identity of God's being and God's revelation can be pressed too far. The point is summarised with admirable clarity by Edwin Van Driel:

... we have thus, on Barth's side, as the starting point God's Trinitarian nature, with the Trinitarian processions being natural and necessary ...; followed by the decree of election, which is not part of God's nature, but dependent on the divine will, and contingent, since God could have been God without being the God of election.⁹⁸

On this side of the argument, the identification of God's actions with God's being is allowed to an extent. For example, God is rightly termed 'Creator'; Jesus is rightly termed 'Son of God'. What is *not* allowed is the identification of God's decision-to-act with God's *eternal* being: God 'existed' in eternity before God created time, and the eternal Son 'precedes' the man Jesus. The logical problem this raises is that with the decision to create and to elect, something was 'added' to God's being. However, the equal and opposite logical problem, which Hunsinger⁹⁹ and van Driel point out, is that if the decision to elect is eternal, then our election (and creation) was *necessary* to God, rather than a freely-willed act of love. And now the dialectical distinction between God and world becomes very shaky indeed. Therefore, this side of the argument maintains that God cannot be *eternally* Creator, given that God was

⁹⁷ Bruce L. McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?", in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 201–33, 218.

⁹⁸ Edwin Chr. Van Driel, "Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007), 45–61, 53.

⁹⁹ See George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24, (2008), 179–98, 188.

“ontologically and logically”¹⁰⁰ ‘existent’ *before* creation. Likewise, the Son was “ontologically and logically” ‘existent’ before he willed to elect himself to be for us.

In effect, what Hunsinger is pleading for is the retention of mystery when talking about the being of God:

The primordial *form* of God’s eternal self-relationship is necessarily inaccessible to us, even though its *content* assumes a secondary form for our sakes. *Deus pro nobis* would not be *God* if he were not perfectly and primordially *Deus extra nos*.¹⁰¹

Just as the nineteenth century theologians failed to ‘find’ Jesus by mining the gospels for his self-consciousness, so Hunsinger is contending that we will fail to find God by digging around in a doctrine of revelation. For him, therefore, the eternal being of God is not locatable *behind*, but is in fact entirely *independent of*, our temporal perception of God’s revelation, including the incarnation. That means that Hunsinger can “logically and ontologically” separate God’s essential being from his being-in-act: in Frei’s terms, God was an “Ascriptive Subject” before God ever intentionally acted. However, in the postliberal anxiety to avoid subjectivism, this leads Hunsinger rather oddly to posit a “double structure” of objectivity in the Son, perhaps in a Chalcedonian sense. Hence he can write that “The Son is always hidden from us in his first mode of being (*asarkos*), but manifest to us in his second mode of being (*ensarkos*).”¹⁰²

It is not the purpose of this thesis to do more than give this brief sketch of the positions involved, and certainly not its purpose to assess the validity of these two interpretations of Barth. The purpose is rather to ask what Frei can contribute to the clarity of the debate. Faced with these two opposing positions on the logical relations between God’s being and God’s actions, what would Frei’s position have been? This assessment is complicated by the fact that, in his absence, Frei has been largely claimed by one side of the debate, and blamed by the other: Hunsinger was, of course, Frei’s student, while Bruce McCormack has shown a consistent hostility to Frei, attributing to him the continued ‘misreading’ of Barth in American postliberal

¹⁰⁰ A phrase used throughout van Driel’s essay.

¹⁰¹ Hunsinger, “Election and the Trinity”, 189.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 191.

theology.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, it may be that Frei is neither the friend, nor the enemy, which the respective proponents suppose.

One suspects that Frei – a theologian looking always to avoid abstraction and to ground theology in the concrete content of God – would be dismayed by the increasing abtruseness of the debate. While the proponents insist that, like Barth, they are determinedly anti-metaphysical, this debate is effectively speculation about the being of God. In the light of Barth’s ‘actualism’, certainly there is an ontological realism underpinning this debate, grounded as it is, particularly by McCormack, in revelation. But this does not remove all charges of abstraction, or even of metaphysics. The ‘being-in-becoming’ model that Jüngel attributes to Barth basically asserts that God reveals Godself as a Trinitarian God who reveals trinitarianly. This is content of a sort, but it reads more like grammar than ontology: once more, a kind of delimitation of the rules for talking about God, rather than a concrete content. After all, when posited as a starting point for the logic of belief, in what sense is ‘Trinity’ less abstract than ‘God’ or ‘Christ’? Indeed, Jüngel himself admits the problem, that when we endeavour to speak of the concreteness of God’s being, our thinking “must necessarily become more difficult and ‘abstract’”.¹⁰⁴

This on-going debate concerning the being and action of God in the incarnation is therefore a twenty-first century instantiation of the problem Frei spotted early with regards to Barth’s theology. As we know, Frei was unhappy with Barth’s starting point in the *being* of God, or later, in the being of Christ. In Frei’s time this had led to the abstractions of the existentialist concept of God; and here it has led to a new brand of speculation about the being of God, either divorced from (Hunsinger), or “pressed back” from (McCormack), God’s revelation in history.

¹⁰³ McCormack writes how “from at least 1974 (if not earlier) right down to the present day, the word “Barthianism” has been understood by the great majority in American theological circles to be virtually synonymous with the views of Hans Frei and his associates.” McCormack’s problem with this is that “Frei opened the door to an understanding of Barth in which questions of reality-reference will be suppressed in favour of a concentration on the internal logic of theological statements”. McCormack, “Beyond Nonfoundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth”, 115, 123.

¹⁰⁴ Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, 31.

In his doctoral study on the doctrine of revelation in Barth, Frei describes how, even if ‘the medium is not the thing’, nevertheless “the form is founded in the content”.¹⁰⁵ One might paraphrase these two statements as follows: while the media which God has chosen for direct or indirect revelation (the human person Jesus Christ, scripture, proclamation) are not to be correlated directly with the being of God, yet the fact that God reveals in the form of the threefold Word actually provides us with knowledge of the being of God:

This Word in its distinction from the Father is nevertheless identically God with him. In God, therefore, the ontic and the epistemic analogies are one.¹⁰⁶

That Jesus is a person means that we can rightly think of God as a person; as scripture and proclamation are words, so it is appropriate for us to identify God with God’s Word of power. Thus the *form* of revelation is based upon or determined by the *content* of what is revealed: the *content* of God as a ‘person’ grounds God’s analogous ‘choice’ of a human being as the *form* of revelation. There is therefore a thoroughly suitable fit between the ‘medium’ and the ‘thing’, as between an original and an image. For us, this means that if Jesus is available to us in narrative form, then we can legitimately posit that God is available to us in narrative form, even if, as Francesca Murphy points out, “God is not a story”. At the same time, if Jesus is “elusive”, then we can legitimately read this as a revelation of the ontological and epistemological elusiveness of God. This final point in itself might go some way to answering Hunsinger’s plea for the maintenance of mystery.

However, when it comes to the relation between form and content, Hunsinger makes an interesting move. Both sides of the argument define the ‘content’ of God as Trinitarian, accepting Jüngel’s attribution of non-metaphysical ‘concreteness’ to this content in revelation. As expressed by Colin Gunton:

The order of being grounds the order of knowing, so that what God does in time is shown to be a function of what he is in eternity. The outcome is that historical revelation and eternal being correspond to one another.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 476.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 7.

¹⁰⁷ Gunton, *Act and Being*, 97.

This statement in itself is not particularly controversial: it is a principle accepted by both sides of the debate. However, what Hunsinger then does is separate out the ‘form’ and the ‘content’ of God – or, if you will, the ontic and the epistemic, or the *deus* and the *dixit*. Thus he posits a “primordial form” of God, which may or may not be Trinitarian *an sich*, despite God’s self-revelation as Trinitarian. This is because, in revelation, it is the *content* of God which is revealed as Trinitarian, and not the form; and furthermore, this “secondary” Trinitarian content is not to be equated with an unknown and unknowable “primordial” form. This is a curious return to the kind of dualism which Frei had all combated in his own time.

This relates to Frei’s further point, that the intention must be seen as being given in and with the act, for *especially* in the case of God, intention cannot exist in abstraction. This is very close to McCormack’s position, except that Frei also insists that we cannot “press back” from an act to an intention, eternal or otherwise. This assertion is slightly counter-intuitive. It must always *seem* like we are working ‘backwards’ from the act to the intention, but we are in fact refusing to do this, because we are refusing all abstractions. In actuality, we are working in a kind of simultaneity: the intention is given in and with the action. And in terms of strict grammatical logic, we are in fact always working ‘forwards’, from the subject to the predicate, from the intention *to* the action.

Thus initially, McCormack’s logic works well. He begins with the concrete action of election, and Frei would approve of his refusal to separate this from the eternal intention of God. Indeed, Frei would also approve of McCormack’s insistence that this intended action is actually constitutive of the person that is God. I would suggest that for this reason, McCormack’s ontological logic is closer to Frei’s position than is Hunsinger’s.

However, once again we must state, that ontological logic is not the same as grammatical logic. For what McCormack does now, is try to reverse the *grammatical* logic by “pressing back” the predicate into the subject. While in the logic of ontology and epistemology, God can be described as eternally electing, the logic of grammar insists that one cannot work backwards from predicate to subject,

for that would be to suggest that the predicate, “has elected”, would have been essential to God, *even if God had never elected*. Once again, as with Barth’s *deus dixit*, McCormack never *actually* abstracts God’s essential intention to elect from God’s action of election. Indeed, he predicates the former on the latter. But this is precisely the problem with his “pressing back” formulation. The grammar is the wrong way round; the predicate controls the subject, and so we have the logical conclusion of a free-floating, abstract, and *essentially*-electing God. This ‘essentialism’ is precisely what is so objectionable to the other side of the debate.

This confusion of grammatical and ontological logic is perhaps even more prominent on the other side of the debate. Indeed, van Driel finds himself caught in these same vexing logical knots which Frei had so carefully unravelled. Like McCormack, he too wrestles with the same notion of reading ‘forwards’ from being to act, or ‘backwards’ from act to being, for which concepts van Driel uses the terms “downstream” and “upstream”. However, the difference is that van Driel mistakes the vexed question of grammatical order to be even more profoundly ontological than does McCormack. Van Driel proposes that a better interpretation of Barth would be to understand Jesus Christ not as “a subject, but [as] an act and determination of divine willing ... as the being of Jesus Christ.” In other words, when Barth writes, “Jesus Christ is ... God in his movement towards man”¹⁰⁸ van Driel suggests that “it is not the subject of the sentence with whom Barth identifies Jesus Christ, but the verb, the action.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, for his preferred “upstream” option, working from ‘act’ to ‘being’, van Driel formulates the question as follows: “if Christ himself is the electing God, what does this tell us about the divine being and identity?”¹¹⁰ However, where McCormack refused to separate subject and predicate, as Frei himself counselled, the intended effect of this move for van Driel is precisely to separate the predicate “Jesus Christ” from the subject “God”. In this way, Jesus Christ (as the *logos ensarkos*) is not of the *essence* of the Godhead; and so the freedom of the pre-existent subject is affirmed.

¹⁰⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2: The Doctrine of God*, (London & New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 7.

¹⁰⁹ Van Driel, “Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ”, 58.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 46.

It is not my purpose to quibble with this interpretation of Barth. However, my suggestion as to what Frei might say to this debate, is that he would propose an untangling of this profound confusion of ontology and grammatical logic. Once again, Frei insists that one cannot read an abstract subject ‘behind’ or “upstream” from the one presented to us in action. Grammatically, then, the order must be “downstream”, for given that we cannot say everything at once, then the correct logical order is *first* the eternal being of God, and *then* God’s actions – first subject, then predicate.

Given that we cannot speak about everything at once, we are grammatically obliged to separate God’s being and God’s acts in this way, and to speak about them in that order. However, once again it is important to make the point, that *logical* is not the same as *ontological*. A pleasing linguistic parallel is not an argument: logic and ontology travel along separate tracks, for all that these tracks might run side by side for a time. Much of the current debate has become entangled in this very confusion which Frei was at such pains to avoid: van Driel, for example, throughout his paper, refers always to “logically and ontologically” to the point that one suspects the two have become indistinguishable for him. McCormack is clearer on the point:

Jünger certainly does grant a logical priority to Trinity over election – but only a logical priority. Talk of an ‘ontological priority’ of Trinity over election must inevitably result in an abstract, wholly metaphysical conception of the triune being of God which stands behind the event in which God chooses to be God ‘for us’ in Jesus Christ.¹¹¹

McCormack’s position does therefore appear to me to be more congenial to Frei than that of his opponents, although in Frei’s view, it still would err in the direction of abstraction from the story of Jesus Christ, not to mention the dubiousness of the “pressing back” schema. If we accept van Driel’s suggestion, that Jesus is the predicative content of God (and there is some value to this formulation), then once again, it has to be with the stress that ontology and epistemology – the *deus* and the *dixit* – cannot be separated. We cannot work ‘back’ from Jesus to God. We cannot posit the subject God apart from the predicate Jesus. And we cannot conceptualise the intention to send the Son apart from the action of sending of the Son. In

¹¹¹ Bruce McCormack, “Election and the Trinity: Theses in response to George Hunsinger”, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63 (2010), 203–24, 207.

ontological terms, as McCormack recognises, the ‘intending being’ and the ‘acting being’ are given as one. Indeed, ontology and epistemology, ‘intending being’ and intended action, are so simultaneous, that van Driel’s consignment of God to subject and Jesus to predicate becomes redundant. For if Jüngel is correct, that God is best understood as “being in becoming”, then outside of the category of strict grammatical logic, there is no “downstream” and “upstream”, no before or after, no ontological priority of subject over predicate.

6. Conclusion

In summary, then, Frei offers to this debate a concept of the vital ‘fit’ between grammatical ordering and ontological form and content, alongside an insistence on the vital distinction between the respective logics of grammar and ontology. Indeed, given the tendency towards abstruse metaphysical speculation, which is inevitable whenever God’s being begins to be considered in abstraction from God’s acts, Frei’s advice on this matter might well have been to sidestep the always speculative category of ‘ontology’ altogether. At the same time, it is also perhaps advisable to categorising revelation under ‘epistemology’, as if the knowledge of God given in the predicate can ever be separated from the being of God given in the subject. In the event, Frei’s alternative category of ‘identity’ proved itself to be far more useful to him: more useful because it is more concrete, unifying personal being and intended actions – or referent and text – in one non-separable scheme. Indeed, the category of ‘identity’ should perhaps be understood as encompassing both ontology and epistemology, so that grammatically it becomes harder to separate them, thus minimising the temptation also to conceptualise them as separate.

Up to this point, then, we have been thinking in the categories of epistemology, ontology, and grammatical logic. The proposal is now, in the light of the above, to adjust these categories, and replace both ‘ontology’ and ‘epistemology’ with ‘identity’. In the best tradition of Frei, and of Barth before him, this is an *ad hoc* decision, based on the suggestion that ‘identity’ might ultimately turn out to be a more useful category when thinking about the logic of belief and the content of God. Chapters 4 and 5 shall be the test of that proposal.

Chapter 4

The Logic of Belief and the Content of God: Resurrection as Revelation

1. Introduction

One aim of these last two chapters is at last to place Frei in direct dialogue with some of his most immediate theological opponents, that is, the Christian existentialist theologians belonging to the Neo-Orthodox movement. Having clarified (a) Frei's understanding of the unity of subject and predicate in revelation; (b) the basis in figuration of the identity of a person as well as the unity of the biblical text; and (c) the linear and cumulative logic of the realistic narrative hermeneutic it is now possible to proceed to Frei's own anti-existentialist account of the concrete content of God which is the identity of Jesus Christ. That this can be attempted is predicated on the following assumptions, already examined in this thesis but here restated for clarity's sake.

Firstly, there is the logical and grammatical point, that if Jesus Christ is the "concrete content", or the inseparable predicate, of God, then knowledge of the concrete content of *Jesus* is at least indirectly equivalent to knowledge of the content of God. Once again, it is important not to place too much ontological weight upon a grammatical formulation. However, if the grammatical formulation is appropriate to the ontological reality – if the form is indeed founded in the content – then the first part of Frei's hypothesis, that "Christian faith involves a unique affirmation about Jesus Christ ... that he is the presence of God"¹ can at least be tested. It is important to reemphasise that 'identity' is being employed here as a more useful, less loaded term than 'ontology'. As such, given that 'identity' as a category carries less weight than 'ontology', the grammatical formulation may well be able to support it.

¹ Frei, *Identity*, 53.

Secondly, as a category, 'identity' sidesteps speculation and offers a much more concrete account of the content of Jesus Christ which encompasses both ontology and epistemology. This is because the category is capable of uniting intention and action, and moreover, of uniting each separate intended action, as well as 'unintended' passions, in one person. The hermeneutic which deals most adequately with this interactive account of identity is the realistic narrative hermeneutic, which credits story with the ability to render, in a linear form appropriate to the chronological order of history, a person's "cumulative" identity. In this chapter, we will see how Frei applies this hermeneutic directly, through gospel exegesis, to the identity of Jesus Christ. In the process, we will also see how he applies this hermeneutic indirectly to the identity, or concrete content, of God.

Thirdly, this chapter will continue the emphasis on grammatical logic, examining Frei's contention that the identity of Jesus Christ, as read according to a realistic narrative hermeneutic and as revealed most fully in the resurrection, is the only true starting point in the linear logic of belief. We have already seen how alternative starting points, such as Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence", or Barth's *deus dixit*, lead to a divine abstraction. Now, however, some alternative hermeneutical accounts of the identity of Jesus Christ will be considered, with their exegesis of the resurrection examined as the 'test' of their adequacy. In particular, the equal-but-opposite accounts of the existentialist-style theology of Paul Tillich, and the 'historical' theology of N. T. Wright, will be examined as examples of two approaches which take the identity of Jesus as serious and central, but which fail according to Frei's criteria to ground the logic of belief.

1.2. *The Identity of Jesus Christ*

In his 1957 essay on "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", Frei's concern for a christology which has actual 'content' is contrasted to the existentialist approach of Bultmann in particular, in whose theology, Frei remarks critically, "the object is lost sight of".² Frei's criticism of Bultmann and his fellow existentialists is a subtle one³:

² Frei, "Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 106.

that Jesus Christ has no real ‘existence’ outside of our subjective apprehension of him. This means that “other than this ‘encounter’ we can assert nothing clearly about Jesus Christ”⁴ and have no means of attaining concrete knowledge of who he was and what he was like. In effect, the existentialist theologians have taken to a kind of logical extreme the Barthian understanding of revelation as an ‘event’ with no continuity in history: Jesus of Nazareth in his own time was indeed the revelation of God, but that event has not ‘lingered’ in any way, for that would be to make revelation into a human possession. In other words, beyond a “completely formal, positivistic claim that Jesus Christ did once exist in human particularity”⁵ – the necessary basis of our claim that this is indeed *Jesus Christ* whom we have met – our encounter with him in our existential moment bears no relation to who he was in the past, nor indeed to the narrative rendition of him in the gospel. While the existential encounter with Jesus Christ in our historical present seems to solve the faith/history question, offering us an immediate knowledge of God which is not bound to explain how a two thousand year old event can impact upon us now, Frei concludes that this is a knowledge with “no noetic content”,⁶ scarcely to be called knowledge at all.

As we have seen, from Frei’s perspective, the effect of this “eclipse of biblical narrative” is twofold: not only are believers left struggling to find in scripture any positive knowledge of God, but to compound matters, given that biblical criticism has dismissed most of the stories about him as myths, they are also frustrated in their search for any positive knowledge even of the historical Jesus. Nevertheless, if Jesus of Nazareth could still be regarded as revelatory at least in his own time, then he might yet be able to furnish us with some kind of content to God. However, if the historical Jesus is indeed revelatory of God, then revelation is therefore an ‘external’ act of God in history. And given the existentialist split between the external “machine” and the inner “ghost”, it is thereby a virtual impossibility that the objective, historical Jesus should reveal anything of the Subject of that act. At the

³ For all the Frei rarely mentions Bultmann directly in print, Kay describes his position as being “in conscious opposition to Bultmann’s *Christus praesens*”. Kay, *Christus Praesens*, 125.

⁴ Frei, “Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr”, 111.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

root of Bultmann's account of revelation⁷, Frei detects a "sheer epistemological agnosticism with regard to Jesus of Nazareth."⁸ Whatever Jesus was or is, he is not the self-revelation of God.

So Frei then, in his attempt to provide an account of the concrete content of God, is contending with a two-sided hermeneutical problem. As discussed in Chapter 3, on the one side there is the divorce between 'outer' text and 'inner' meaning; while on the other side there is the existentialist divorce between the 'outer' and 'inner' person. Take the two sides together, and the concept of objective revelation has been utterly destroyed. Not only is scripture incapable of carrying the weight of the Word of God; and not only is Jesus Christ himself almost completely elusive; but any Word which God might have spoken, being now 'external' to God's own being, can in effect reveal nothing about God anyway. Therefore, even if we could discover the inner God-consciousness or personality of Jesus Christ, this would not give any content to our knowledge of God, because for the existentialist theologian, revelation *by definition* has no content.

Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic, then, has set itself a formidable task. As discussed previously, it is intended first of all to reunite text and meaning in the gospel narratives at the level of the story. This may or may not result in the reclamation of scripture as the Word of God, but it certainly will allow the narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to be taken seriously as a direct conveyor of meaning: for if there is revelation there, then that revelation will be located first and foremost in the identity of Jesus Christ. Secondly, the realistic narrative hermeneutic is intended to reunite a person's 'inner' self with their outward manifestation, or their 'intentions' with their 'actions'. This is entirely applicable to every individual⁹, but in the case of Jesus Christ something is being said, particularly

⁷ Bultmann's 'demythologising' hermeneutic of the New Testament will be considered in more detail in Chapter 5, pages 201–12.

⁸ Frei, "Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 111.

⁹ It might be added that this general applicability is not because Frei is endorsing a general hermeneutic of the person, but because the uniqueness of every individual is modelled by, modelled on, and entirely dependent on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Besides, there is an inherent logical difficulty with the concept of a 'general hermeneutic of individual uniqueness.'

in the light of his resurrection. This will be examined shortly. But if the realistic narrative hermeneutic can achieve all this, then we will have a concrete and objective portrayal of the identity of Jesus Christ, inner and outer, and possibly even divine and human, all unified in a single personal identity. That was the thesis of Chapter 3.

Following on from this, the task in this chapter is to consider how the realistic narrative hermeneutic creates the conditions for ‘reuniting’ God with God’s own revelation. For God too can be considered as a ‘person’, given that God’s self-revelation in chronological history has given us permission to render God’s identity in linear narrative form. There is no suggestion that this will be a full or complete rendering – this is not possible even at the level of an average human life – but it will be an accurate and an adequate rendering. If God is self-identical with God’s own revelation, and if through exegesis Jesus can be identified as God’s own revelation, then finally we will have the content of God. This content is identical with the story of Jesus Christ: what Jesus did, God also did; what Jesus underwent God also underwent; and therefore, what can be predicated of Jesus’ identity can also be predicated of God.¹⁰ Frei cites with approval the maxim of the realistic novelist Henry James: “‘What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?’”¹¹ In other words, *who God is* in Christ determines *what God does*; *what God does* in Christ illustrates – and indeed, constitutes – *who God is*. It is, as we have seen before, “a pattern of exchange”.¹² As a result, if it survives exegetical testing, Frei’s realistic narrative hermeneutic offers the real prospect of supplying the content of our knowledge of God.

¹⁰ This is not a simple, direct correlation, in which we can “press back” Jesus’ Jewishness and maleness, for example, into the being of God. Rather, it is an indirect correlation, one which is aware that the ‘medium’ is not the ‘thing’. Hence, in an account of the identity of Jesus Christ, we too must differentiate between Jesus’ socially, historically, and biologically constructed identity, and the unique and unsubstitutable identity in which he redefines and “governs his own predicates”.

¹¹ Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 19.

¹² Frei, *Identity*, 152.

2. Continuity and Contingency: Frei and Schleiermacher on Identity

2.1 Frei's Gospel Exegesis

In the previous chapter we discussed Frei's two-fold account of identity: that of the intention-action scheme, and that of self-manifestation description. Now it is time to follow Strauss' axiom, that "the critical examination of the life of Jesus is the test of the dogma of the person of Christ"¹³, and apply these directly through exegesis to the identity of Jesus Christ.

In "Theological Reflections", Frei describes how there are several "stages" leading up to Jesus' full identification. The first stage concerns the stories from before his birth up until his baptism. Here, "the person of Jesus is identified wholly in terms of the identity of a community". Far from being an individual, he is "Israel under the representative form of an infant king figure". Indeed, rather than having an identity of his own, at this stage the people of Israel "lend their identity to, they bestow it upon him".¹⁴ At this 'pre-active' stage of his life, Jesus does not yet intentionally act, but simply bears the hopes and titles ascribed to him by others.

This all changes when Jesus' ministry begins. Now he appears for the first time as an individual man. As an active and historical agent, he performs numerous intended actions, all of which help us to describe what he was like: he was obedient to God, he loved the poor and the outcast, he despised hypocrisy, he was a powerful healer. "Nevertheless," claims Frei, "he retains something of the symbolic or representative quality that he had in the first part of the accounts"¹⁵, particularly as a representative and inaugurator of the Kingdom of God. This representative quality is particularly evident in the various titles applied to him and claimed by him: Son of Man, Son of God, Christ, etc, climaxing in Peter's insight at the Transfiguration, that "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". However, Frei claims that these titles and ascriptions, while certainly 'clues' as to the identity of Jesus Christ, are not yet individuated. This is because they pre-date the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In a sense,

¹³ D. F. Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften* Volume 5, p.4, cited in Frei, *Eclipse*, 234.

¹⁴ Frei, "Theological Reflections", 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* See also Frei, *Identity*, 166.

they are being tried on him for size; and when the passion sequence gets underway, it begins to look as if these titles do not fit him so well after all. Indeed, as ‘The King of the Jews’ is nailed to the cross above the broken and humiliated man, Frei observes how “there is an increasing tendency to use the titles ... with an ironic and pathetic twist”.¹⁶

The necessity of maintaining both accounts of identity simultaneously becomes stark in the exegesis of the third stage of Jesus’ identification: the arrest and crucifixion. In his active ministry up until his arrest, Jesus *is what he does* – a classic intention-action scheme of identity. Indeed, with the Gospel of John in particular, Jesus’ “abiding initiative” is extended into even his crucifixion and death, “to the point of the elimination of Jesus’ passive, helpless suffering”.¹⁷ There is no Gethsemane in John’s gospel.

Nevertheless, a human body exists in a contingent world, and this means that it is subject to all sorts of outside forces. Frei regards this “co-existence” of power and powerlessness as non-contradictory, admitting that there is an extent to which Jesus powerfully chose to be powerless. But crucially – and what Schleiermacher absolutely could not allow – Frei’s concept of identity can also account for the *transition* between the former and the latter state of being:

The Gospel writers show us a picture of the actual transition from power to helplessness, a transition held together through the experience of the one undergoing it.¹⁸

Jesus not only ‘is what he does’, but also ‘is what he undergoes’, and in the realistic narrative hermeneutic, the two are held together without strain in the one storied person. Thus Jesus’ “genuine”,¹⁹ and not merely ‘willed’ helplessness upon the cross in no way compromises his identity as saviour, as it would in Schleiermacher’s scheme. Gethsemane is therefore the transition point, where the narrative gives us “access to the storied Jesus’ intention at a crucial point”²⁰; and the crucifixion

¹⁶ Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 37.

¹⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 153.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* 154.

becomes the climax of this particular intention-action scheme, locating as it does “the identity of an individual at the point at which his inward life, coming to outward expression, is linked with or meshes into the train of public circumstances”.²¹ With the accounts of the crucifixion, therefore, we have all the information we need to describe what Jesus was like, and in particular to point to obedience as his most defining characteristic.

However, in Frei’s realistic narrative hermeneutic, while the narrative of the crucifixion sequence reveals clearly *what Jesus was like*, it still leaves much ambiguity concerning *who Jesus is*. Jesus may be ‘the crucified one’, but it is not clear that this is anything more than a tragedy, the cruel death of a good and godly man. The evidence we noted earlier in the gospel of his claims to divinity is now thrown into utter confusion by the increasing powerlessness of Jesus in the events which culminate in his helpless and pathetic death. As we shall see, this ambiguity as to Jesus’ identity is only resolved, in Frei’s scheme, in the resurrection.

2.2 Schleiermacher’s Gospel Exegesis

Where Frei’s understanding of the storied person could hold together with ease such seeming contradictions, the ‘disconnect’ between who Jesus is and what was done to him was deeply troubling to Schleiermacher. On one level Schleiermacher was deeply committed to “the positivity of historical revelation”.²² This commitment meant that Jesus could not be abstracted to a consciousness apart from his physical presence. However, the immediate effect of Schleiermacher’s locating of revelation in the inner, unbroken consciousness of Jesus is that the interaction of character and incident recedes in importance: what Jesus does, and what is done to him, is of little consequence. In the hermeneutic of understanding, the locked eyes of the author and interpreter, of the Redeemer and the Christian, cannot ‘look around’ at external events, and so external events can have had no role in the shaping of the identity of Jesus Christ.

²¹ Frei, *Identity*, 154.

²² Frei, *Eclipse*, 315.

Schleiermacher himself put his own hermeneutic to the exegetical test in a series of lectures published as *The Life of Jesus*. According to his principle of the unity of the authorial consciousness, Schleiermacher states in Lecture 62 that “we are concerned that the picture of Christ that we have formed should be continuous and remain the same to the last moment”.²³ As Frei points out, if “the crucial continuity of the story ... lies in the inner being of Jesus”²⁴, then his death, if actual, would be a fatal interruption of that being, i.e., a fatal breaking of Jesus’ self-consciousness which could not then recover even in a ‘spiritual’ resurrection. The effect of this would be to render the task of understanding entirely futile. It is therefore vital to Schleiermacher’s scheme that the ‘resurrected’ Jesus maintains the same unbroken consciousness: that he is “the same as he had been before”.²⁵

As Frei reads Schleiermacher, the logical consequence of this hermeneutical stance is that Jesus’ death could not have been a real death: it can only have been a *Scheintod*, a ‘seeming-death’, for “no genuine death had taken place”.²⁶ Nevertheless, this assumption, in which Frei is not alone, is to do Schleiermacher an injustice. First of all, he contends that the physical reality of Jesus’ death is impossible to prove one way or the other by reference to the gospel texts. Schleiermacher equates physical death with the decay of the body, one succeeding the other *immediately*. However, there is little evidence that such decay did take place in Jesus’ body – he cites Peter’s speech in Acts where Peter references Psalm 16 – “Thou wilt not ... let thy Holy One see corruption”²⁷ – as proof that Jesus’ body did not decompose. Therefore, if his body did not decompose, then he did not *actually* die. However, even-handedly, Schleiermacher also points to the separation of the blood and water coming out of Jesus’ side as an indication that decomposition had indeed begun. The point cannot be resolved.

²³ Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 417.

²⁴ Frei, *Eclipse*, 313.

²⁵ Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 444.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 416.

²⁷ Cited in *Life of Jesus*, 416.

Fortunately for Schleiermacher, the point does not have to be resolved. The subtlety of his christological position is that it does not rely on the real or otherwise death of Jesus. The point is that Jesus' role as Redeemer can in no way be dependent on any contingent event. To take this even further, given that Jesus, as human, must have been limited by language and historical accident, then there is no reason at all for considering him to be unique – that is, unless his “absolute ideality” resided, not in what was externally expressed, but in his inner being:

... in the sense that that inner being may always transcend its manifestation, and what is manifested be only an ever more perfect presentation of it.²⁸

The crucifixion, then, as an accident of history, truly does not matter to Schleiermacher. It has no bearing on the inner being of Jesus, and is neither *a* nor *the* saving event. That is not to say that the crucifixion did not happen, and nor is it to assert that Christ did not really die. These are simply inconsequential historical details. As the editor glosses it neatly in his notes to *The Life of Jesus*, “What is theologically inconsequential happens historically to be true”.²⁹

Similarly, for Schleiermacher, the post-resurrection Jesus must be the same in body and in spirit as he had been pre-crucifixion. There can be no positing of a ‘spiritual body’, or a body which has been ‘transformed’ in any way: it must be a human body, a *fully* human body, which ate and drank and visibly bore its wounds. Schleiermacher finds much support for this position in the gospel³⁰, although he has more trouble dealing with a Jesus who can pass through walls and appear and vanish suddenly. However, these latter events, he concludes, can be interpreted perfectly naturally. The important point is that Jesus “does not want anyone to think of his resurrection state as differing from his state he was before.”³¹

Schleiermacher, then, is insistent on the “wholly natural corporeity of his [resurrected] state”.³² Once again, this is not to be thought of as a denial of his actual

²⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 379.

²⁹ Jack C. Verheyden, in Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 431n.56.

³⁰ See Luke 24:37–43; John 20:20–29, 21:1–14.

³¹ Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 447.

³² *Ibid.* (my parenthesis)

death. Indeed, as Schleiermacher himself points out, if Jesus had merely suffered terrible tortures and a near-death experience before being revived, we could hardly account for his apparent health and vigour only a few days later. So on balance, although he refuses to commit himself too definitely, it seems that Schleiermacher ultimately comes down on the side of an actual death at the crucifixion, and a ‘real’ (i.e., historically factual³³) resurrection. Thus far he holds an orthodox position. However, given that the God-consciousness of Jesus must be unbroken, it might be a reasonable statement of his position to say that it was only Jesus’ body which died: his ‘consciousness’ did not die, although it did “reach zero”³⁴ – although whether this can be fully conceptualised is questionable.

For Schleiermacher, then, the very foundation and principle of Jesus’ unity with God is entirely dependent on his God-consciousness being unbroken. For this reason, he rejects the cry of desolation as indicating some kind of separation between Jesus’ self-consciousness and his consciousness of God:

I can think of no moment when the relationship between God and Christ could have changed. It must always have been the same.³⁵

Furthermore, it is not only Jesus’ identity which is compromised by the disruption of his death and resurrection, but God’s identity is compromised too. To imagine the abandonment of Jesus by God is to deny that God is powerful and loving, and to deny also that Jesus is the Redeemer, for his very redeeming efficacy is by virtue of “the constant potency of His God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in Him”.³⁶ Thus the idea of abandonment is both a logical nonsense and an utter offence to Schleiermacher, given that the understanding of Jesus’ unbroken God-consciousness is for us the whole of redemption.

³³ Schleiermacher approaches the idea of historical fact very cautiously when it comes to the resurrection, qualifying any such assertion as follows: “There is something in it that is wholly factual, but the genesis of it is incomprehensible to us (or is incapable of comparison) because it is connected with something that in its way is unique and for which there is no analogy”. *Life of Jesus*, 480.

³⁴ Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 416n.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 423.

³⁶ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 385.

In Frei's view, the exegetical test confirms that Schleiermacher's hermeneutic of understanding simply is not adequate to the task of reading the realistic narratives of the gospel. Just as the art of understanding is context-free, applicable to all texts in all situations, so has the consciousness of Jesus been divorced from all context, with the result that the events of his life do not in any respect constitute who he is. This means that his role as Redeemer is in no way related to his death, *Scheintod* or otherwise – and this despite every insistence of the gospel to the contrary. It took Strauss to perceive that at the heart of Schleiermacher's reading of the gospel lies a theological and methodological dilemma: "Schleiermacher," he writes, "is a supernaturalist in Christology but in criticism and exegesis a rationalist."³⁷ The painful hermeneutical contortions outlined above are the result. However, Frei's insight was that, when the hermeneutic of understanding is applied to realistic narratives, "fearful and wonderful things begin to happen to those texts"³⁸, and the shape of the narrative is entirely distorted:

It never occurred to him that there is something unfitting, indeed ludicrous, about rendering the story of Jesus in a way that makes such a thundering anticlimax possible.³⁹

In its inability to reconcile its universal methodological principle with the demands of the particular narrative, it is Frei's judgement Schleiermacher's hermeneutic of understanding has failed the *ad hoc* exegetical test.

2.3 Comparison

Nevertheless, Schleiermacher's account was not without its uses for Frei. Like Schleiermacher, Frei also insists on a vital continuity between the earthly Jesus of Nazareth and the resurrected Jesus. However, in his case this becomes a continuity of *identity* rather than of consciousness. For Frei, Jesus' inner God-consciousness simply is not accessible through a reading of the gospels:

The task of writing a life of Jesus, especially one including as its pivotal point his 'inner' life, is difficult if not impossible – whether it is undertaken as a reconstruction from recorded data or by entering by imaginative reiteration into his self-understanding, or both.⁴⁰

³⁷ Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*, 160.

³⁸ Frei, *Eclipse*, 320.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 313.

⁴⁰ Frei, "Theological Reflections", 34.

But although Jesus' inner consciousness is not accessible, his narrative identity *is* accessible to us. Furthermore, Frei is in full agreement with Schleiermacher on at least one other core principle: that Jesus Christ is unique. Precisely on this basis, Frei refutes any suggestion that the gospel accounts should be read as myth: for myths, Frei writes, "are stories in which character and action are *not* irreducibly themselves":

The point is to be made, then, that if one identifies the savior figure with a fully human being, the story cannot be retold by substituting somebody else as its hero who is then made to be fully identical with that original person. No matter who the savior may be, if he is a person, once the identification is made he is *that* person and no one else.⁴¹

Equally, for Schleiermacher, Jesus is clearly irreducible to any other figure in history or fiction. In addition, and for all Strauss' sarcasm, Schleiermacher is insistent that the 'Jesus of History' and 'the Christ of Faith' (Strauss' terms, not Schleiermacher's) are not separable, but are continuous, so that the impression Jesus makes on believers in the present is much the same as the impression he made on his disciples in the past. It could be Schleiermacher himself and not Frei who wrote:

The identity of the crucified Jesus and that of the risen Lord are one and the same in the accounts.⁴²

While Frei interprets the idea of continuity rather differently, he is nevertheless side by side with Schleiermacher in asserting that "to think of him dead is the equivalent of not thinking of him at all".⁴³

The main difference between the two accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection, is that where Schleiermacher sees the 'continuity' of identity in 'organic' terms, i.e., the body of Jesus was the same *natural* body post-resurrection as it was in pre-crucifixion, Frei sees "the story of the connection between his death and resurrection" as "not an organic but a *dramatic* transition".⁴⁴ To an extent then, and for all his realism, Frei too avoids the question of the corporeality or otherwise of the

⁴¹ Frei, "Theological Reflections", 11. (my italics)

⁴² Ibid. 13.

⁴³ Frei, *Identity*, 180. Interestingly, Schleiermacher never actually gives an account of what happens to Jesus after the resurrection beyond a brief description and dismissal of the ascension stories: there is a sense in which Schleiermacher's risen saviour is still on earth in the same form. Certainly, Schleiermacher's Jesus does not die again!

⁴⁴ Frei, "Theological Reflections", 32. (my italics)

risen Jesus. The narratives say that this was a bodily resurrection, and are adamant that this body, although transformed, is continuous with his pre-resurrection body, right down to the wounds in his hands and feet. And that is as far as Frei takes the matter. This is precisely the kind of avoidance of the ‘real’ historical referent which so irritates such otherwise different theologians as Francesca Murphy and N. T. Wright. However, Frei’s refusal to discuss the nature of the resurrection in any kind of scientific or historical terms should not be interpreted as a denial of its actuality. It is simply an admission, that beyond the narrative lies only speculation. Once again, to ask the historical question, ‘Did this really happen?’, or the scientific question, ‘How is this to be explained?’, is to make a category error. In the context of the gospel narratives, the resurrection makes sense as a dramatic climax to the story of Jesus, eliciting first a start of shock, and then a recognition of its utter aptness. Beyond this narrative fitness Frei saw no need to go.

3. The Historical Jesus and the Existentialist Christ

3.1 Introduction

Who Jesus is: “It is this ambiguity,” Frei writes, “that is resolved in the resurrection account”.⁴⁵ Exactly at the moment when Jesus is dead, in that moment of complete powerlessness when he has in effect no more ability to intend or act – that is the climactic event of the narrative, and therefore the moment when his fullest identity is revealed. The question then becomes how to read this revelatory event, so that what we have finally is a positive account of the concrete content of God?

In the mid 20th century, there were two principle theological options for the treatment of the resurrection which Frei was obliged to answer, both of which survive in slightly altered forms into the 21st century theological scene. The most prominent when Frei was writing was of course the Neo-Orthodox existentialist-style interpretation. This was the position already examined at length in discussion of H. Richard Niebuhr, but which by the time of Frei’s mature theological writing was typified by Paul Tillich – the very same who had first recognised what Niebuhr

⁴⁵ Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 31.

himself was doing. However, before proceeding to Tillich, the intention is first of all to examine the other main theological option, that of historical biblical theology. By this means, consideration will be given to the main criticisms which have been directed at Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic. In addition, this treatment should also demonstrate something of the tightrope which Frei was walking between objective historical realism and subjective historical experience. In the course of this treatment, the reasons for his own choices should become clearer, as will the issue of the continuing influence of Frei's voice in current theological debate.

3.2 The Historical Jesus: N.T. Wright and the Historicity of the Resurrection

Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic is particularly vulnerable to criticism from New Testament scholars and historians. With his claim for the gospel being "history-like", and his insistence on an objective realism based on the concrete narrative of Jesus, Frei's main target was Christian existentialism. However, in the process, he also raised questions of history which many think he never adequately answered. The example mentioned above, of his avoidance of the historicity or otherwise of the bodily resurrection, is one such criticism. Meanwhile, Frei's refusal of the question of 'fact', coupled with his concept of the unity of the biblical narratives, and his insistence on reading the disparate, even fragmented gospel narratives as one "cumulative" story, differentiate his concerns sharply from those of biblical scholars and from more historically-minded theologians. Not only does he avoid answering directly the question of historical fact, but he is often interpreted and appropriated – or misinterpreted and misappropriated – as arguing for a purely literary approach to the gospel. This is the assumption of Francesca Murphy, for example. Historically-inclined theologians are less than impressed. Here, for example, is Francis Watson in critical mode:

Hans Frei seems to me to stray too close to this position in his emphasis on "the story as story" and on "the storied Jesus," about whose being prior to his literary embodiment we are not to inquire (Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, pp.102, 115). Frei tends to assimilate the Gospel to the genre of the modern realistic novel, which is "the special vehicle for setting forth unsubstitutable identity in the interplay of character and action" (p.82). It does not occur to Frei that a range of relations to the real can coexist within a single narrative (also in a

realistic novel) and that judgements about these relations may be integral to the act of reading.⁴⁶

This criticism, however, is not entirely fair. The point as to the ‘realistic novel’ genre has already been addressed in Chapter 3: as pointed out there, Frei is not so simplistic as to apply a modern genre to an early text, but is rather rooting the entire western tradition of realistic narrative in the model of the Bible.

What is more, Frei freely admits that when it comes to the passion-crucifixion sequence in particular, the question as to historical fact must be asked:

This one thing historians and novelists have in common: they deal with specific actions and specific human identities. If a novel-like account is about a person who is assumed to have lived, the question of factuality is virtually bound to arise.⁴⁷

Indeed, the more “unsubstitutable” Jesus’ identity becomes throughout his ministry, the more specific and “history-like” are the events related: compare the historical detail of the week of his arrest, to the vague context of the Sermon on the Mount, for example. Further, Frei admits that to believe in the bodily resurrection is to take an ‘historical risk’: should proof ever emerge that Jesus’ bones are still in a grave, then his faith would cease.⁴⁸ Therefore, as Mike Higton concludes, “right at the heart of [Frei’s] theology (and Jesus’ resurrection is at that heart), there is a serious correlation between the description of Jesus in the gospel and general theories of historicity and factuality – not a wholesale appropriation of those theories but a genuine and risk-filled encounter with them nonetheless”.⁴⁹

Frei therefore does not so much ignore the question of history as keep it firmly in its place. “I am well aware of ...,” he writes:

... but not terribly distressed by, the fact that my refusal to speak speculatively or evidentially about the resurrection of Christ, while nevertheless affirming it as an indispensable Christian claim, may involve me in some difficult logical tangles. Even so, I

⁴⁶ Francis Watson, “*Veritas Christi: How to Get from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith without Losing One’s Way*”, in Beverly Roberts Gaventa & Richard B. Hays, editors, *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 96–116. Citation 108n–109n.

⁴⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 175.

⁴⁸ See Frei, *Identity*, 183: “Because it is more nearly factlike than not, reliable historical evidence *against* the resurrection would be decisive.”

⁴⁹ M. A. Higton, “Hans Frei and David Tracy on the Ordinary and the Extraordinary in Christianity”, in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 79 (October 1999: 566–91), 570.

believe this is a better way than the contrary path (taken, for example, by Wolfhart Pannenberg) and a religiously significant way at that.⁵⁰

By his own admission, then, Frei sidesteps the question of history, and never attempts a systematic exploration of it. Nevertheless, this is not a lacuna in his thought, but a carefully worked-out decision simply not to go there. This is not only because he judges the scientific historical question to be a “category error”⁵¹ when it comes to the realistic narratives of the gospels, but also because it separates Jesus’ identity into two components: the Jesus of history is distinguished at source from the Christ of faith, so that it is then a huge theological struggle to reunite them. Hence Frei’s preferred literary approach shelves these questions, and *necessarily so*. They may be important to other theological considerations, but they are of no importance at all to the identity of Jesus Christ beyond a logically basic affirmation that he existed. To become tied up in historical questions of factuality is simply to divert attention away from the only source of knowledge which is available to us: either Jesus’ identity is constituted by what he did and what was done to him as narrated in the gospel, or he has no identity for us at all.

To an extent, the work of historians, and even of biblical critics, need not trouble us here. Their interest is almost purely in historical investigation of the Bible as source-text, and therefore they are working with a very different set of categories. Critical historical study, as Barth pointed out, is necessary to ground and limit theology, but it is not concerned in itself with making theological statements. Of much greater interest here are those theologians (as opposed to ‘pure’ historians) who contend that historical study does not merely provide theology with its necessary negative condition – the empty tomb as a negative condition for claims to the bodily resurrection, for example – but who insist that a theology of the resurrection can and should be based *positively* on critical historical study. In Frei’s time perhaps the

⁵⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 59.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 60.

main proponent was Wolfhart Pannenberg.⁵² Now in the 21st century, this is a position much associated with the theologian N.T. Wright.

N.T. Wright at first glance appears to represent the opposite end of the spectrum to the existentialist approach. However, Wright is no ‘mere’ historian: he is very clear in his opposition to the “quest of the historical Jesus” as it has been carried out according to a hermeneutic of “post-Enlightenment scepticism”.⁵³ In particular, Wright has set himself to combating the most recent manifestation of the “quest” in the historically rational approach of the Jesus Seminar.⁵⁴ Working very much from an apologetic ‘faith perspective’ (for all his claims to historical neutrality), and with a tendency to take the biblical narratives at face value as historical sources, Wright insists on the actuality-in-history of the events of the resurrection, and hence on their (at least theoretical) demonstrability.

Very close to the beginning of *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Wright sets out his project, which is to reclaim the historical study of Jesus from “the Procrustean

⁵² See in particular Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977. Pannenberg writes here, that “There is no justification for affirming Jesus’ resurrection as an event that really happened, if it is not to be affirmed as a historical event as such. Whether or not a particular event happened two thousand years ago is not made certain by faith but only by historical research, to the extent that certainty can be attained at all about questions of this kind.” (99).

⁵³ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 6.

⁵⁴ “The Jesus Seminar” was founded by Robert Funk, and counts among its members the theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. It has been defined as “a consultation of historical scholars that meets regularly in America. They are best known for a project undertaken from 1985–1996, when they considered the historical authenticity of sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus ... Membership was open to all persons with academic credentials and a willingness to suspend personal religious convictions in order to reconsider matters on the basis of historical evidence alone.” Mark Allan Powell, “Jesus Seminar”, in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity, Volume 3*, Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, eds., (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 31–3, 31.

Key texts of The Jesus Seminar include Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospel: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, (New York: MacMillan, 1993); and Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: What did Jesus really do?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

Both Crossan and Borg have published in dialogue with N. T. Wright. See John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006). See also Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

bed of a reductionist worldview”.⁵⁵ In so doing, his intention is to redeem history as a *theological* discipline. Shortly afterwards, he outlines his parallel project: to redeem also theology as an *historical* discipline. At this point he discusses Frei at some length, setting out his main objections to Frei’s ‘theological’ approach to history. Where “reductionist” historians insist that historical study of the resurrection *couldn’t* be done, Wright claims that Frei’s theological approach says that it *shouldn’t* be done.⁵⁶ His comment below is highly insightful:

If I have understood Frei, he was arguing that we should not try to investigate the resurrection historically because the resurrection is itself the ground of a Christian epistemology. Everything that Christians know, they know because of the resurrection and for no other reason. There can therefore be no starting-point, no neutral ground on which one might stand, from which one might observe the resurrection itself. Even to try to find one constitutes a kind of epistemological blasphemy. You must not try to shoot arrows *at* this target, because the only appropriate place *from* which to shoot at anything is where the target itself is standing.⁵⁷

Thus far Wright has read Frei absolutely correctly: the citation above chimes exactly with Frei’s reading of Auerbach and the “tyrannical” text of the Bible. Furthermore, as we shall see by the end of this chapter, Frei does indeed consider the resurrection to be the starting point in the logic of belief for all talk about and knowledge of God. However, Wright refuses to concede to Frei that the question, *What happened at the resurrection?*, is either unanswerable or “a kind of epistemological blasphemy”, adding that “we cannot decide ... in advance”⁵⁸ whether the resurrection does indeed constitute the starting point for our knowledge of God. To an extent, Frei would agree: the question as to the revelatory quality of the resurrection cannot be decided in advance. But where Wright insists that it cannot be decided in advance of historical investigation, Frei contends that it cannot be decided in advance of a realistic narrative exegesis of the gospel texts. In other words, where Frei freely admits that he is testing a “basic conviction” which has been derived from the texts via the community, Wright is less than willing to concede this. Instead, he holds out for the ‘neutrality’ of the historical investigative process which, using a range of biblical and non-biblical sources, can speculate as to the likelihood of the resurrection as the “‘best explanation’ for the historical data”.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Wright, *Resurrection*, 13.

⁵⁶ See *Ibid.* 20–1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 21.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 719.

We have already considered Frei's critique of such supposedly 'neutral' standpoints. However, Wright's critique of Frei in turn merits some attention. His main point of contention is that Frei, in purportedly rejecting historical investigation, has outlawed the apologetic function of theology to such an extent, that there is now no shared language between faith and the 'rational' world outside. This makes it absolutely impossible to demonstrate any historically-factual basis to Christianity:

Frei's proposal, in the last analysis, is always in danger of describing a closed epistemological circle, a fideism from within which everything can be seen clearly but which remains necessarily opaque to those outside. Even if it is true that a fully Christian epistemology would want to begin all its knowing with Jesus, confessed as the crucified and risen Messiah, that does not mean that there is no access to Jesus and his death and resurrection in the public world. If Frei were right, how could we *know* that the resurrection was the only valid epistemological starting-point? If the answer is, because only that will work, how do we respond to those who say that other starting-points work just as well?⁶⁰

To isolate two points here: in the first case, as pointed out in Chapter 2, Frei is very clear in his opposition to the hermeneutical circle, and so opposes the 'faith hermeneutic' as a starting point for theology. By contrast, and far from being a "closed epistemological circle", Frei insists that the narrative identity of Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen saviour is entirely accessible to believers and non-believers alike. In addition, there is something profoundly 'concrete' about his understanding of the biblical texts, which alone provide us with an objective access to Jesus' identity, and hence to the content of God. Thus Frei has made it quite clear that there is indeed access to Jesus in the public world, and this, moreover, by a means which is far more accessible to the non-believer than either historical research or someone else's existential encounter. Once again, Frei insists that faith is no precondition to a right understanding of the texts, nor even to knowledge of the content of God – though how that text-based knowledge then becomes a living faith is something on which Frei refuses to speculate. But then, Wright has the same problem of explaining how historical knowledge might make the transition to a faith commitment.

Secondly, Frei "knows" that the resurrection is "the only valid epistemological starting-point" precisely because "only that will work" when tested by an *ad hoc* exegesis. In other words, Frei has read the narratives, and arrived at the conclusion that that is precisely what the narratives are saying. In turn, that conclusion can only

⁶⁰ Wright, *Resurrection*, 22.

be tested by reading the gospel narratives. If the hermeneutic is “closed” anywhere, then it is closed here. However, this is not the enclosure of a hermeneutical circle, for the conclusion that the resurrection is “the only valid epistemological starting point” becomes a new hypothesis to be tested with each subsequent linear reading. Rather, the “closed” nature of the realistic narrative hermeneutic is in fact the fixed text of the gospel and their fixed narrative form, for Jesus has no other narrative than this. There is therefore no need to respond to those who claim that their starting points work “just as well”, for any alternative starting point is clearly derived from somewhere other than the biblical narrative, and they are therefore working on an entirely different logic of belief. They are free to do so, and their logic of belief might take them some interesting places, but the fact remains that they are starting from something other than the Christian story. It follows then, as Frei demonstrated in *Eclipse*, that if they extend this logic of belief to the knowledge of the content of God, then the God they will derive will be abstract and content-less. This is inevitable precisely because they will have divorced God from God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, whose concrete identity is known to us through scripture alone.

Once again, by refusing to speak either speculatively or evidentially – in effect, by “laughing”⁶¹ at the historical question – Frei has shown that he much prefers his own “logical tangles” to the logical bind of the historical approach. Indeed, when Wright describes his own hermeneutical method, he reveals himself as curiously 19th century in his approach, insisting on the neutrality of the historical method despite his own obvious faith-hermeneutic, while at the same time working as hard as did Schleiermacher to protect Jesus from the method’s reductive tendencies. At the same time, his apologetic appeal to a generalised rationality of human experience is combined with a 20th century existentialist-style stress on the *absence* of God. Witness, for example, his description of St Paul’s thought processes:

Ed Sanders, in his well-known reading of Paul, argues that Paul did not start off with a problem and then discover that Jesus was the solution; he discovered Jesus, found him to be God’s solution, and then figured out that there must have been some kind of problem. This can be shown to be, not exactly mistaken, but misleading. There was an earlier stage involved as well: Paul’s thought moved *from* his Jewish perception of ‘the plight’ *to* the

⁶¹ The reference is to Barth’s chapter on Strauss, where Barth claims that the way to understand Strauss (and Feuerbach), is first of all to “love” their questions, and “laugh” at them. See Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1972), 568.

solution offered in Christ *and thence to a fresh analysis of the problem*. The ‘problem’ he eventually described was a rethought version of the ‘problem’ he had before he began.⁶²

In other words, where Barth and Frei contend that there is no knowledge even of our *lack* of God outside of God’s revelation, the realist historian Wright is adopting assumptions and a method absolutely typical of Christian existentialism. As we shall see, particularly in the discussion in Chapter 5 on the theology of Bultmann, the transcendent ‘absence’ of God, and our awareness of that absence, is central to existentialist theology. Sure enough, the human “plight” for Wright is our awareness of the absence of God, to which Jesus appears only as a secondary “solution”.

Thus Wright’s historical approach is predicated on a number of existentialist assumptions, including the “plight” of the human being, an absolute dialectic, and a hermeneutical circle. Even more pertinently, he assumes along with both liberal and existential theology, that historical human experience has to be the starting point in the logic of belief, to which God then appears further down the line as revelation and answer. It may well be that Frei’s preferred ‘literary’ approach to revelation has its weaknesses. However, these pitfalls of the historical approach to theology bear out the wisdom of his dogged avoidance of the historical question.

3.3 The Existentialist Christ: Paul Tillich on the Resurrection

For all the almost accidental overlap, N.T. Wright’s historical approach is designed to occupy the opposite end of the spectrum to the existentialist reading of the resurrection. One gets the impression that the criticisms of biblical historians were never much more than a nuisance to Frei; however, as one of the foremost proponents of Christian existentialism, Paul Tillich represents Frei’s serious theological ‘opposition’. Indeed, Frei spends some time in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* explaining and countering the “strangely moving interpretation”⁶³ of Jesus as the symbol of our alienation from our true selves. Frei’s contention throughout is that the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of a theological starting point will become evident in exegesis, most specifically of the crucifixion/resurrection sequence. As such

⁶² Wright, *Resurrection*, 22.

⁶³ Frei, *Identity*, 89.

Tillich's account of the resurrection in his *Systematic Theology*⁶⁴ makes for an instructive contrast.

Firstly, therefore, we must establish Tillich's own starting point in the logic of belief. As a Christian existentialist, he is by definition a dialectic theologian, and therefore, at least to some extent, a disciple of Barth. However, Tillich's existentialist understanding of the dialectic took him in a direction which illustrates neatly Frei's unease with the 'faith hermeneutic' as propounded by Barth. Once again, Frei thoroughly approved of the *ad hoc* nature of Barth's theological method, with its key exegetical emphasis. However, he was deeply worried by the door which Barth had opened to the kind of theological existentialism which was espoused by Tillich.

In addition to his dialectical prolegomena, Tillich had a particular view of the task of theology. His project in his *Systematic Theology* is to define all doctrine according to the "ultimate concern" of theology, which he understands as "the abstract translation of the great commandment" to love God and neighbour. He then defines further the *content* of this "ultimate concern":

The question now arises: What is the content of our ultimate concern? ... the answer, obviously cannot be a special object, not even God, for the first criterion of theology must remain formal and general. ... Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or non-being. Only those statements are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of being or non-being for us. This is the second formal criterion of theology.⁶⁵

Tillich's system begins, then, with *our* "ultimate concern", so that it is the human situation which creates the theological imperative. He then proceeds from that starting point to extract the "content" of our ultimate concern. Given his starting point, his logic of belief dictates that such content cannot lie *outside* us, but equally, given the absolute dialectic, neither can God be found *inside* us, in our consciousness. Therefore our ultimate concern "cannot be ... God", but must in fact be ourselves: whatever it is that "determines our being or non-being". That means that, right from the start of Tillich's system, there is no way of arriving at any content to the concept of God. Not even Jesus can provide this: as Frei explains, the

⁶⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Combined Volume*, (Welwyn, Herts: James Nisbet and Company Ltd, 1968).

⁶⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 17.

existentialist understanding of the redemptive work of Jesus is not so much that he is the incarnate God, but rather that he is “*our* embodiment or representative”.⁶⁶ The only content we can know is ourselves: and this is something Tillich not only admits, but actually upholds as the principle task of theology.

In contrast to N.T. Wright, Tillich cannot be labelled a liberal theologian along the lines of the 19th century Schleiermacherians. Tillich and Frei are entirely in agreement as to the redundancy of earnest attempts to construct ‘Lives of Jesus’ from biblical and historical evidence, Tillich observing that the historical Jesus “not only did not appear but receded farther and farther with every new step”.⁶⁷ Moreover, Tillich’s diagnosis of the problem, as a confusion between the “factual side of events” and “the receiving side”⁶⁸, is a long way from the ‘eclipse’ of the narrative that Frei perceives. As Tillich explains in a long paragraph, the gospel miracles should be read as attempts to express the significance of the man Jesus of Nazareth in symbolic, mythical terms:

We have distinguished between historical, legendary, and mythical elements in the biblical records. For the purpose of showing the universality of Jesus as the Christ within his individuality, this distinction provides three ways of looking at the biblical materials. The first is that of historical reports which were chosen according to their value in answering the questions of human existence generally and of the early congregations especially. This produces what has been called the “anecdotal” character of the Gospel stories. The second way emphasises the universal quality of particular stories through a more or less legendary form. The third way expresses the universal meaning of the whole event of Jesus of Nazareth in symbols and myths. The three ways often overlap, but the third way is decisive for christological thought ... In order to describe the universal significance of Jesus as the Christ on the basis of the biblical literature, one must hold to the symbols and use the historical and legendary stories only in a corroborative sense.⁶⁹

Tillich’s “ultimate concern”, we remind ourselves, is the “abstract translation” of the Great Commandment, in order to extract what it has to say to us about our Being. In that light, the resurrection itself becomes symbolic of our “ultimate concern”. Tillich’s exegetical project is therefore to decode this symbol by extracting the true meaning behind the representative form: and in doing so, he discovers that the ‘true meaning’ of the resurrection is “the conquest of existence”.⁷⁰ Quite avowedly, and

⁶⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 89. (my italics)

⁶⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 117.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 118.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 175.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 176.

for all his self-differentiation from liberal *theology*, Tillich is still working within a liberal *hermeneutic* of searching for the meaning ‘behind’ the story. For Tillich as for Schleiermacher, the Bible stands ever in need of “translation”: what it cannot do is simply mean what it says.

So how does Tillich interpret the resurrection? In dialectical fashion, he ties it to the event of the cross, and like Frei, conceives of the two as absolutely “interdependent”⁷¹: if the cross symbolises “the subjection to existence”, then the resurrection symbolises “the conquest of existence”.⁷² The cross is “part of a myth”, but should also be understood as “a symbol based on a fact”, for Tillich also acknowledges it as an actual historical event. While Frei does not refer directly to Tillich, the following description of the existentialist position is entirely applicable to him:

His [Jesus’] death is unique precisely and paradoxically because he, unlike others, surrendered all claims to uniqueness by his act of dying, and so became one with all of us ... Jesus ... is truly “the man for others,” the one to whom all things happen and who takes all upon himself in such a way that he becomes the true pattern for all humanity...⁷³

For Tillich, then, the crucifixion of Jesus is therefore yet another tragedy “in the long history of the tragedy of man”.⁷⁴ However, with a forward reference to the victory of the resurrection, it is also “the Cross of the one who has conquered the death of existential estrangement”.⁷⁵ Therefore it is more than just a tragic event, although it is *also* a tragic event. The hint of a figurative reading here is indicative of the richness of Tillich’s symbolic hermeneutic: given that, for the existentialist theologian, revelation occurs in history, history is no mere brute fact, but is pregnant with meaning.

In his exegesis, Tillich notes the parallelism by which the “objective” Cross is raised to “universal symbolic significance”⁷⁶, while simultaneously, the “universal

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 176.

⁷³ Frei, *Identity*, 89–90.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 177.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 176.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 177.

symbolic significance” of the resurrection is reported in determinedly objective terms – “Touch my hands and my feet”. However, he extrapolates from this interdependence that, just as Jesus himself was both an historical person and the one in whom “the typical human situation finds its most concentrated symbolical expression”,⁷⁷ so too must the cross and the resurrection “be both reality and symbol”. Thus Tillich regards both the cross *and* the resurrection as real historical events: “In both cases,” he writes, “something happened within existence,”⁷⁸ for if the resurrection is not in some way an actual historical event, then that is the equivalent of nothing happening at all. Tillich does admit that whatever happened in the crucifixion and the resurrection, the two events were not of the same order: one is clearly an historical event, while the other a mystery. Nevertheless, the dialectical parallels and paradoxes are such that they quite clearly belong together as event and symbol both. One could even argue that they are *held* together as event and symbol by the storied identity of Jesus Christ, himself event and symbol.⁷⁹ There is therefore none of Schleiermacher’s “thundering anticlimax” to Tillich’s account. On the contrary: Frei comments of the existentialist Jesus that “his end is altogether of a piece with the rest of the story”,⁸⁰ for the story of the archetypal, alienated human, the wandering stranger, is fittingly concluded by an empty tomb.

Tillich, then, insists upon the historical actuality of the resurrection. However, the exegetical test demonstrates that he defines that actuality very differently to how the gospels define it. He claims that the symbol of resurrection was one readily available to Hellenic and Judaic culture, and so was adopted by the followers of Jesus so to objectify their belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Believing this, they also actually *made* him the Messiah, for “the Christ is not the Christ without the church”.⁸¹ Nevertheless, Tillich maintains the uniqueness of Jesus, locating it in the early church's conception of Christ: their account of the resurrection, he claims, transcended the myths available to the early church, in that no other resurrection

⁷⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 89.

⁷⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 177.

⁷⁹ These categories of ‘event’ and ‘symbol’ could be seen as yet another instantiation of ‘outer’ and ‘inner’, or even ‘human’ and ‘divine’.

⁸⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 89.

⁸¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 178.

account combined event and symbol in quite the same way. He argues therefore, that the event of the resurrection should not be understood as the actual raising of the physical body of Jesus, even if it could be proved historically that that is what actually happened. Neither – perhaps surprisingly – should it be understood as the raising even of a spirit:

Certainly, it is not the death of an individual man, no matter how important. Therefore, the revival of an individual man or his reappearance as a spirit cannot be the event of Resurrection.⁸²

For Tillich, a spiritual resurrection would still be an event ‘out there’, which would render it irrelevant *to us*, even if that is exactly what happened. As Tillich pointed out in his introduction to his *Systematic Theology*, the instance we try to describe the resurrection, it loses “its character as object”. What is more, our attempt at description then turns on us in judgement, making an object of us “whenever we try to make it our object”.⁸³ In other words, even an objective resurrection has no objective reality, for that would be to make its revelation a ‘possession’ and not an ‘event’. Better by far to think of the resurrection as an event *then* in the experience of the early disciples, and as an event *now* in the experience of the believer.

Tillich concludes that, as a *subjective* event, the resurrection should be understood theologically as a concrete expression in symbolic form of an abstract principle, which is the experience of the victory of Jesus over non-being. Tillich therefore reads the resurrection as *the* defining existential event in the lives of Jesus’ followers, in which they found that they were no longer estranged from God. This experience – “of being grasped by the power of the New Being”⁸⁴ – is actual enough for Tillich (perhaps disingenuously) to term it a “fact”.

The power of the existentialist account is the great imaginative appeal of the symbol, and the space it opens up for our active participation in the creation of its meaning. Frei describes the existentialist Jesus thus:

After having faded from the imagination of sensitive men during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jesus has reappeared to the inner eye of the imagination in the

⁸² Ibid. 180–1.

⁸³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 15.

⁸⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 179.

twentieth. His reappearance to contemporary imagination, however, is neither in the orthodox garb of the miraculous Savior raised from the dead nor in the form of the great moral example of heroic action. Instead, as he is frequently depicted in the imagination of present-day writers of fiction, Jesus is the archetypal man, or the pattern for authentic humanity. He is the *stranger* – as we all are – in this harsh and hostile universe.⁸⁵

This is, as Frei admits, a “strangely moving interpretation”. Without naming Tillich directly, he gives an appreciative analysis of existentialist-style Christ-figures in modern literature.⁸⁶ However, he ultimately rejects these Christ-figures, for they are unable to cope with “the unique coherence in Jesus of two elements: unsubstitutable individuality and universal saving scope”.⁸⁷ Therefore, Frei’s principle objection to the existentialist scheme is not that it has devalued the gospel narrative, nor that it has downplayed the literal sense – although it may have done both of these things – but primarily that it has turned Jesus the *person* into Jesus the *symbol*. The very point of a symbol is that, while it does have concrete actuality, it does not have its own *meaning*, but means only as it refers to something beyond or behind. So when it comes to Jesus’ resurrection, Frei describes how for the existentialist “His resurrection is the symbol of our ascending (or descending) to another level of our being, so that his presence is diffused into and made to represent all mankind seeking to grasp its own basic longing and true hidden spirit”.⁸⁸ The meaning is not in the symbol itself, and nor is it in the story. The meaning is in us.

Ultimately, Frei judges that the existentialist theological system has, once again, begun in the wrong place. Such is the power of its appeal, that the wrongness of its starting point perhaps only becomes evident at the other end of the logic of belief, where we find that the existentialist Jesus, rather oddly, has no identity of his own:

In this view, he cannot, after the fashion of orthodox belief that emphasises his literal resurrection and ascension, *own his own presence*, or possess a life of his own, for to do so would mean that he is at a different level from our own true being, as if he were on another planet, gazing vacantly at nothing. Owning his own presence there would preclude sharing it with us.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Frei, *Identity*, 88–9.

⁸⁶ In Chapters 7–8 of *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei analyses in turn Herman Melville’s Billy Budd, Jesus Christ as depicted in Kazantzakis’ *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and the priest in Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*. For all their literary merits, Frei judges these depictions to be “theological ... failures” (129).

⁸⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 123.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 91.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

If Jesus is indeed the archetypal wandering stranger, the one who has risen in order to “diffuse his mysterious presence into the imagination and consciousness of human beings”,⁹⁰ then he has no actuality, no ‘outwardness’, to call his own – not even the more limited actuality of a resurrected spirit, let alone the concrete actuality of a resurrected body. The result is a loss of his ability to intend and to act, and a loss too of his name (the stranger has no name), his socially-constructed identity, and ultimately of the Subject which might hold all these predicates together. Of course, in Tillich’s scheme, the loss of the Self (in order to find the Self) is rather the point: for the existentialist theologian, Jesus’ uniqueness paradoxically lies in his surrendering of his uniqueness. Ultimately, however, Jesus’ unique identity is made into a symbol of our less-than-unique human condition, and so in the event, his ‘meaning’ is entirely constituted by us. After all, symbols have meaning only as meaning is given to them.

From his starting point of “being or non-being *for us*”, Tillich proceeds in the logic of belief to the claim that “the event on which Christianity is based has two sides: the fact which is called “Jesus of Nazareth” and the reception of this fact by those who received him as the Christ”.⁹¹ In effect, Jesus of Nazareth would nothing more than the ‘Jesus of History’, with no extension in time or significance, apart from as he is received by his followers. This allows Tillich to claim that Christ and the church are also dialectically “interdependent”⁹², just like the resurrection and the cross. This interdependence applies equally to the presence of Christ now as to the biblical witness, for Christ is not Christ except as he is received by his church and *continues to be so*. Tillich’s own logic of belief leads him directly to this point, where God’s self-revelation has become dependent upon its reception-history in humanity. So when seeking the identity of Jesus, in history or in faith, who then becomes the object of theology? It can only be the followers of Jesus, then as now, who received him and receive him and give him his meaning. The content of God is an irrelevance.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 90.

⁹¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 112.

⁹² Ibid. 114.

4. Current Approaches to the Identity of Jesus Christ

4.1 The Revival of Reception-History

For all that Tillich wrote his *Systematic Theology* in the 1960s, his focus on reception history continues to influence the current debate about the identity of Jesus Christ, most particularly at the point where systematic theology meets with biblical criticism. This has recently been evidenced in the 2008 collection of essays, *Seeking the Identity of Jesus*.⁹³ The intention of this collaborative project was to bridge the gap between historical biblical studies on the one hand, and systematic theology on the other. The resulting essays illustrate clearly why this is such a fraught task, and illustrate also the prescience of Frei, both in his anticipation of some of the issues, and his plain avoidance of others.

It becomes clear that Frei is seen as something of a father-figure for this line of theological inquiry. William Placher, for example, gives due homage in statements such as, “I propose that the four canonical Gospel ... are *history-like witnesses to truths both historical and transcendent*”.⁹⁴ However, as Frei well understood, each generation of theologians has its own theological task, and a formidable one has been set christology by the Jesus Seminar. In the face of the Jesus Seminar’s historical deconstruction of the gospel accounts, the location of the identity of Jesus Christ has been shifted: this volume of essays concedes that the narratives are too historically unreliable to constitute Jesus’ identity as such, but contends that they are significantly more reliable as a record of his reception history. Therefore Placher can cite with approval Robert M. Fowler, that “the key to understanding the ending of Mark is not to understand the women or men in the story, but to understand what is happening in the women or men reading the story”.⁹⁵

⁹³ Beverly Roberts Gaventa & Richard B. Hays, editors, *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008.)

⁹⁴ William C. Placher, “How the Gospel Mean”, in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa & Richard B. Hays, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 27–42, 27. This essay is derived in part from an earlier publication, William C. Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

⁹⁵ The citation is from Robert M. Fowler, “Reader-Response Criticism: Figuring Mark’s Reader”, in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 80. Cited in Placher, “How the Gospels Mean”, 29.

While this interpretation of the gospel is not new in itself, the new element here is that Jesus' reception history actually constitutes his identity. The happy result is, that while there may be much contradiction between the gospel narratives and the historical actuality, there is now no such contradiction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Hence, coming from a biblical studies perspective, Dale C. Allison can state, that "the temptation narrative, which recounts events which probably never happened, nonetheless rightly catches Jesus in several respects".⁹⁶ Like Placher, Allison's point is that the church's later commentary on Jesus is a historically reliable source of theological content. Meanwhile, Francis Watson is even more explicitly indebted to Tillich, stating his thesis as follows:

*The theologically significant Jesus (the Christ of faith) is the Jesus whose reception by his first followers is definitively articulated in the fourfold Gospel narrative. This thesis attempts to bridge the chasm of presumed incommensurability between historical Jesus research and a theology that regards the fourfold Gospel narrative as a given. It is the concept of "reception" that can reconnect the two...*⁹⁷

Indeed, Watson cites Tillich with approval, that "without this reception the Christ would not have been the Christ, namely, the manifestation of the New Being in time and space".⁹⁸ Thus, while Watson insists that "the Jesus of faith comprehends the historical Jesus but is not to be reduced to him"⁹⁹, he has in effect reduced not only the Jesus of faith *but also* the historical Jesus to a subjective existential experience, so that the concept of *Christus extra nos* has all but ceased to be relevant. The result is that the quest of the historical Jesus has been transformed into the quest of the historical community. In this way, Tillich's understanding of reception history as constitutive of Jesus' identity has been found to be very useful to this collaborative project.

4.2 William Placher on "How the Gospels Mean"

However, this new attempt to find a rapprochement between theology and historical biblical criticism has its problems, many of which were anticipated by Frei. These

⁹⁶ Dale C. Allison, Jr, "The Historian's Jesus and the Church", in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa & Richard B. Hays, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 79–95, 82.

⁹⁷ Watson, "Veritas Christi", 105.

⁹⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 2, 114. Cited in Watson, "Veritas Christi", 105.

⁹⁹ Watson, "Veritas Christi", 106.

problems can usefully be illustrated by Placher's approach. Placher himself was a pupil and loyal admirer of Frei, and a co-editor along with George Hunsinger of the posthumous collection of Frei's essays, *Theology and Narrative*. Indeed, he claims in "How the Gospels Mean", that "I am in this whole essay following the conclusions, albeit inadequately, of my teacher Hans Frei".¹⁰⁰ However, in this essay, and in *The Triune God*, he betrays an increasingly ambivalent relationship with his old mentor. On the one hand, in the light of modern biblical scholarship he cannot now read the gospel as simple and direct accounts of actual 'real world' happenings. On the other hand, he wishes to avoid the option which he understands Frei to have taken, of treating the gospel purely as literature.

Placher is therefore anxious to assert the historical trustworthiness of these accounts in the face of what he sees as the reductive historicism of the Jesus Seminar:

Yet the Jesus Seminar insists that lacking any trustworthy particularism, we cannot possibly have a trustworthy generality.¹⁰¹

Placher accepts the lack of "any trustworthy particularism", but insists that we do have a "trustworthy generality", which is Jesus' reception history. In support of this contention, he points out that people usually remember general characteristics more accurately than specific incidents. Indeed, the implication is that these first witnesses actually might have 'made up' some of these stories about Jesus, which, while not factually true in themselves, nevertheless truly illustrate Jesus' character:

An emphasis on general characteristics does not dodge the question of truth. A character portrait of Adolf Hitler that made him out to be a nice guy would be false – even if every report within it of kindness to dogs and small children were true. So too the Gospels, if they did not convey the person Jesus was, would be false. Many of their episodes we can take to be illustrative anecdotes; nevertheless, some stories narrate an event so central to the picture of Jesus they present that, in Hans Frei's words, it "allows and even forces us to ask the question, 'Did this actually take place?'" He could have healed one person rather than another, spoken one parable rather than another, and still have been the same person. But not, for instance, if he had lived to a ripe old age rather than dying on a cross.¹⁰²

My suggestion is that Placher has read Frei wrongly here. Frei's riposte would or should have been, that Jesus *could not* have healed one person rather than another, precisely because he *did not* heal one person rather than another: the question is a

¹⁰⁰ Placher, "How the Gospels Mean", 34n.19.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 35.

¹⁰² Ibid.

redundant one, suggesting in the intended-action scheme that somehow Jesus could have done other than he did, and therefore have been other than he was. As Barth himself puts it, “Where the actuality exists, there is also the corresponding possibility”.¹⁰³ Besides, there is a certain offensiveness in the implication, that the unique people with whom Jesus interacted were themselves somehow “interchangeable”, their active and affective role in the formation of Jesus’ identity being reduced to a static “illustration”. This is not a rich account of human character and interaction.

However, Frei is partly to blame for Placher’s misreading. Frei’s almost exclusive focus on the “connected narrative sequence”¹⁰⁴ of the passion and resurrection makes it impossible to downplay its significance for the identity of Jesus Christ. After all, it is at this point in the narrative that Jesus is “most of all himself”, so that this sequence “does not merely illustrate or represent his identity. Rather, it constitutes what he is”.¹⁰⁵ But equally, this narrow focus makes it very possible to do as Placher did, and downplay the earlier, more disconnected events in Jesus’ story. This downplaying is further encouraged by Frei’s observation, that the question about what a person is like seeks to discover “a typical state or action of a person that would properly and genuinely constitute or characterize him”.¹⁰⁶ Here Frei is trying to account for his second category of identity description, that of self-manifestation. His idea is that a person’s identity persists even through seemingly ‘out of character’ moments, in that we can only attribute ‘out of character’ if we already have a conception of more typical behaviour. Placher, however, has read this caveat as permission to abstract Jesus’ defining qualities from the *more* illustrative events, and then apply them as a hermeneutical lens to judge the meaningfulness of the *less* illustrative incidents. As we have seen, Frei will not allow any such hermeneutical circle.

¹⁰³ Barth, *CD II/1*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 152.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 136.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Exploiting this ‘loophole’ in Frei’s thought, Placher is able to conclude that a generalised ‘idea’ of a personality is of greater import than any particular intended action. In *The Triune God*, he even cites Frei to support this point:

In the instance of Jesus, it may well be that certain of his sayings or specific, isolated episodes recounted from his brief ministry, which are quite enigmatic in character and tell little about him, such as his condemning a fig tree because it would not yield fruit out of season (Mark 11:12–14), are much more nearly reliable historical reports than those in which his over-all personal intention is more clearly depicted.¹⁰⁷

Placher adds to this citation, “This is not a reason to try to base our understanding of him on a collection of such enigmatic stories.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, when seeking the identity of Jesus, he suggests that we might be better to regard the gospel narratives as Barth did – at least, according to David Kelsey:

... as a source of anecdotes about what Jesus said or did which one would tell to show ‘what he was like’. The anecdotes that fall together into a given group are interchangeable. Barth is not interested in them for themselves but for the *patterns* that recur in a number of them. The incidents the anecdotes recite serve to *illustrate* Jesus’ personhood, not to constitute it.¹⁰⁹

Frei, however, would have been happy neither with this notion of “interchangeability”, nor with these worryingly generalised “patterns” of story, for the implication is that none of these events are in themselves constitutive of Jesus’ identity.¹¹⁰ This is yet another example of working in the wrong direction, “pressing back” from action to intention, so that the predicate becomes of the *essence* of the subject, regardless of whether it is ever “illustrated” in action. Therefore, to say that an incident “illustrates”, but does not constitute, Jesus’ identity, is to prioritise the attribute over the story, in logical order as well as in theological importance. In the process much of Jesus’ uniqueness is lost: for others are ‘loving’ or ‘obedient’ besides Jesus, but no one else shares his unsubstitutable story.

Indeed, Kelsey’s concept of “illustration” can only be achieved by a flattening of the complexity of all that goes into the making of an identity. Placher’s analogy of his

¹⁰⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 175, cited in Placher, *The Triune God*, 56–7, and in “How the Gospel Mean”, 34n.19.

¹⁰⁸ Placher, *Triune God*, 57.

¹⁰⁹ David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 43. Cited in Placher, *Triune God*, 43.

¹¹⁰ Note that according to Kelsey, it is the incidents themselves that fail to constitute Jesus’ identity, and not merely the telling of them. Hence *who Jesus is* by this account is not constituted by *what he does*, not even in his historical actuality. Francesca Murphy’s criticism that postliberalism confuses person with story may perhaps stick to Kelsey, if not to Frei.

“curmudgeonly” grandfather, about whom he could not recall a specifically illustrative incident, is particularly unhelpful in this respect. The quality of “curmudgeonliness” as perceived by the grandchild is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the vast array of intended actions, contingent events, and ascriptive titles which go into the making of an identity, as held together by the unique subject-self. I have no doubt that Placher’s grandfather was a considerably more complex character than one, or even a multitude of adjectives can convey, and so to proceed from that abstraction to the selective telling of, or even making up of, illustrative stories, constitutes a kind of abuse of his identity. The point of a realistic narrative is that it retains the ability to convey a *complex* identity, precisely because it precedes any adjectival definition, and remains always open to a number of interpretations. An elusive, complex, and unique identity is truly conveyed, but never trapped, in its own narrative.

As it happens, in context, all Frei is saying about the fig tree incident is that simple description of what Jesus said and did should not be confused with “intimate knowledge”¹¹¹ of his inner life. Not knowing exactly why Jesus was motivated to condemn the fig tree is not the same as judging the incident as incidental to his identity. At this point, we remind ourselves of Frei’s model of a linear, cumulative hermeneutic, in which layer after layer of identity is built up from his starting point: the fig tree incident is one of the many layers which contribute to the rendering of an individual, complex, and elusive identity. In similar fashion, even Hitler’s kindness to children should be admitted alongside all our other knowledge of him, as equally constitutive of who he was, in all his individual human unstitutability. Frei’s realistic narrative hermeneutic, with its linear and cumulative logic of belief, is able to render a far more complex account of identity than Placher can envisage.

¹¹¹ Frei, *Identity*, 175.

5. The Resurrection and the Content of God

Frei's realistic narrative reading of the gospel is predicated on the hope that it will enable him to describe truly, though not without residue, the identity of Jesus Christ. The principles of this hermeneutic, as has been illustrated above, are particularly tested in the crucifixion-resurrection sequence, given that it is here that Jesus' identity is revealed as unique, not merely in terms of the uniqueness of all human beings, but in a Chalcedonian sense, as uniquely human and divine. It is precisely at this point in the logic of belief that non-narrative hermeneutics break down, because once again, only a story can hold together two such logical contradictions. And therefore, it is at this point that the adequacy of the realistic narrative hermeneutic for rendering the content of God will finally be tested. If Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic actually works in exegetical practice to prove his hypothesis, then the crucifixion/resurrection sequence should reveal who Jesus of Nazareth is in his full identity; and moreover, it should reveal also that this identity is co-identical with the identity, or content, of God.

For Frei, Jesus' death is no *Scheintod*, nor yet a symbolic event, but a "real, complete disruption"¹¹² of the ascriptive subject that is Jesus of Nazareth. If, while he hung on the cross, he might yet have managed to call down avenging angels, with his death there is no 'self' left to intend or to do anything. He truly cannot save himself, and so the utterly powerless redeemer "himself ... stands in need of redemption".¹¹³ This is the miracle and revelation of the resurrection, where at last the activity is none of Jesus', but all of God's. Frei sees this 'takeover' as beginning earlier in the passion sequence, where "the action of God ... began to supersede Jesus' initiative beginning with the arrest". But now, in the resurrection, and beyond all ambiguity, God is "climactically the agent".¹¹⁴ This is the moment when the intention-action and self-manifestation schemes for describing identity now come together to reveal

¹¹² Hans W. Frei, "Of the Resurrection of Christ", in *Theology & Narrative: Selected Essays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 200–6, 204.

¹¹³ Frei, "Theological Reflections", 13.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 33.

something astonishing. According to a realistic narrative reading of the gospel, while it is *God* who intends and acts in the resurrection, it is *Jesus* who is manifested:

It is he [Jesus] who is present and none other when God is active. Jesus alone is manifested, and he is manifested as none other than God's presence, which is singularly he himself.¹¹⁵

In other words, *God's* action results in *Jesus's* full presence and identity. The subject and the predicate have come together in Jesus Christ in such a way that they cannot be separated without the same kind of destructive violence that is required to split a person in two. As such, and despite the necessary grammatical sequencing, there can be no separation of identity between God and Jesus. At the resurrection, the identity of God the acting subject has been "pressed forward" into Jesus the predicate.

In other words, here is revelation. Here at last is the content of God, and it is revealed to be Jesus Christ in all his unsubstitutable identity. What is more, if Jesus is manifested as none other than "God's presence, which is singularly he himself"¹¹⁶, then God can no longer be understood as a distant abstraction, but can be spoken about in essence as a concrete human person: for so God has revealed Godself to be. The question about *who Jesus is*, is therefore answered: the unique identity of Jesus is revealed *as God*, while at the same time, in true figurative fashion, "he remains himself"¹¹⁷, the "crucified human savior". Both identities are held together, without strain, by the unsubstitutable narrative and the unsubstitutable person whose identity it constitutes.

Therefore, to focus on the resurrection as the full revelation of the identity of Jesus Christ is not to ignore the earlier gospel revelations as to Jesus' divine-human identity. These 'clues', as they accumulate, provide more and more compelling evidence that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Christ. Again, this is why the hermeneutic demands a linear, cumulative reading, for "the direction of the process of identification is unilinear – from no singularity to the fullest singular identity".¹¹⁸ Thus the 'evidence' that Jesus is God's revelation amounts cumulatively, but clarity

¹¹⁵ Frei, "Theological Reflections", 33.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*.

¹¹⁷ Frei, "Of the Resurrection", 204.

¹¹⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 172.

will only come at the final denouement, when Jesus ceases to be defined by these ‘clues’, but instead turns round and defines them in their turn.

At this point, Frei detects a circularity of sorts, “though with a difference”:

At the end of the story, as at its beginning, there is full identity between Jesus and Israel. But whereas at the beginning it was the community that served to identify him, the reverse is now the case. He, Jesus, provides the community, as well as God’s Kingdom and the stylized savior figure, with his identity.¹¹⁹

This is not a hermeneutical circularity, where the whole is understood in light of the parts, and the parts in light of the whole. We do not now understand Jesus in the light of the messianic prophecies, and the messianic prophecies in the light of Jesus. This is because the idea of the ‘Messiah’, whatever it meant before, now absolutely cannot be abstracted from the person who is Jesus. Rather, the ascriptive title ‘Messiah’, which was earlier applied tentatively and ambiguously, has now been given the fullest concrete content *by* Jesus and *in* Jesus. In other words, he does not so much fulfil the prophecy of the Messiah as tell the prophecy what it means. In this way, the subject Jesus is shown to share God’s power to “govern(s) his own predicates”, so that “the predicates are what they are” simply and only “because they are his”.¹²⁰ The implication for theological grammar is that we should not say that *the Messiah is Jesus*, but that *Jesus is the Messiah*. The theological grammar works from subject to predicate; the logic of belief remains linear; and in the resurrection, it has led us to a concrete identity of Jesus, who is the concrete content of God.

6. Conclusion

As early as *Der Römerbrief*, Barth’s epistemology was grounded in the belief that “the Resurrection is the revelation: the disclosing of Jesus as the Christ, the appearing of God, and the apprehending of God in Jesus...”¹²¹ For Frei as for Barth, the resurrection defines revelation: it is the *Aha-Erlebnis*, the climactic moment of

¹¹⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 172.

¹²⁰ Frei, *Types*, 83.

¹²¹ Barth, *Romans*, 30.

sudden insight, when what was hidden is now revealed. While it is true that there are clues as to Jesus' divine identity throughout the gospel narratives, it is only at this climax that God and Jesus are revealed to be the same subject. Hunsinger may be correct that Frei did not give enough attention to the two natures of Christ¹²², and Frei does indeed gloss over the stories of the incarnation, categorising them as generalised myths rather than specific history-like narratives.¹²³ However, Frei's project is not to conceptualise the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, nor yet to sketch a doctrine of the two natures: the story holds them together quite well without any abstract explanatory additions. Much more modestly, Frei is working merely on the exegetical starting point for any theological project, in the hope that the right starting point in the logic of belief will enable theologians to talk about the content of God "without engaging in speculation".¹²⁴

Furthermore, the principle needed to be restated, that God's being cannot be separated from God's actions, even though the grammar works in one way only, and is not reversible. Perhaps this can be seen as Frei's version of the twin Chalcedon principle, of the humanity and divinity of Christ co-existing in one person "without confusion *or* division". In the figurative scheme, Jesus is *both* his own unique subject, *and also* one subject with God. Similarly, the identity of God as acting subject includes the identity of Jesus Christ, while yet, in the grammatical logic of belief, Jesus as revelation remains the (inseparable) predicate of God. Indeed, so bound up is the identity of Jesus with the resurrection that to "conceive of him as dead is the equivalent of not conceiving of him at all".¹²⁵

¹²² See George Hunsinger, "Hans Frei as Theologian: The Quest for a Generous Orthodoxy", in *Modern Theology* 8:2, (1992), 103–28. Here, Hunsinger asks "whether Frei really offers us a high Christology in his book [*Identity*]" (114), suggesting that Frei "is more convincing about Jesus' powerlessness than he is about Jesus' power" (115). The implication is that Frei has struggled to maintain the Chalcedonian principle in practice.

¹²³ "The striking fact about this first stage is that ... the person of Jesus is identified wholly in terms of the identity of a community, the people of Israel ... He is a representative person in barely individuated form." Frei, "Theological Reflections", 34–5.

¹²⁴ McCormack, "Grace and Being," 183.

¹²⁵ Frei, "Theological Reflections," 43.

However, at this point we need to slow down a little. While Frei's exegetical discovery does provide us with a concrete content of God in place of the metaphysical abstractions of more philosophical or experiential systems, and in place also of the silence of the historical method on the topic, this does not mean that we now 'have' God in any sense. Where the dialectical theologians turned to the concept of the momentary revelation-event as a means of resisting human 'possession' of the knowledge of God, Frei instead locates his own resistance in the principles of identity-description. The very fact that God reveals as a *person* means that even in revelation, God is "elusive" and unintuitable. Hence the principle of God's epistemological availability in Jesus Christ is *the same principle* which so strongly resists the 'possession' of that knowledge. Thus, as McCormack also insists, God "cannot be read directly off the face of Jesus"¹²⁶, precisely because no person, least of all God, can be known fully, even in their story. This is the whole principle of the unending revelatory richness of a realistic narrative.

In his account of the resurrection as the climactic revelation of the full divine-human identity of Jesus Christ, we therefore have Frei's hermeneutically-based doctrine of revelation, which alone can provide the concrete starting point for any subsequent theologising. So in a sense, Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic should be understood, not so much as theology, but as a kind of 'pre-theology'. It is interesting how often readings of Frei's project begin with this very misapprehension, that he was being far more ambitious than he ever claimed to be: Kay, for example, who reads Frei as trying to *explain* the presence of Jesus Christ¹²⁷ where his only aim was to describe its negative pre-condition; or Murphy, who accuses Frei of imbuing the narratives with the power to produce God. Frei's ambitions for his realistic narrative hermeneutic do not extend so far. But nevertheless, he is being ambitious enough. His exegetical reading of the identity of Jesus Christ has provided him with a veiled

¹²⁶ Werner Elert, *Die Lehre des Luthertums im Abriss*, 1924, considered by Karl Barth in *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion II: Die Lehre von Gott/Die Lehre vom Menschen*, 1924/1925, (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1990), 22; and cited again by Bruce L. McCormack, "Revelation and History in Transfoundationalist Perspective", in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 21–39, 33. Elert was maintaining that one could in fact read revelation 'off the face of Jesus', while Barth (and McCormack with him) maintain that one cannot.

¹²⁷ "Frei demonstrates how "realistic narrative" furnishes a character or an agent an identity, but he exaggerates its capacity to render the presence of Jesus." Kay, *Christus Praesens*, 175.

but concrete content of God, which is the first step in the logic of belief. On the basis of the resurrection, we know now that the God of the gospel narratives is a God who is one subject with Jesus Christ, without whom nothing but abstractions can be predicated of God. He has demonstrated that the content of God is to be found in the identity of Jesus Christ. Now to the real theology.

Chapter 5 The (Self-) Presence of Jesus Christ

1. Introduction

According to his “basic conviction”, Frei’s goal all along in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* has been to demonstrate that knowing the identity of Jesus Christ “is identical with having him present or being in his presence”. As we have seen, this means that the correct order for thinking about Jesus’ presence is to start with his identity; and so it is issues of identity which have taken up the bulk of Frei’s christological study. However, now that the identity of Jesus Christ has been established as the revelation of God, most finally and climactically in the resurrection, Frei is in a position to test out the latter part of his hypothesis. Hence the final chapter of *Identity* can at last proceed from this starting point in gospel exegesis, to an account of Jesus’ presence now. The chapter is short, but it repays close attention, for it is here that the truth or otherwise of Frei’s “basic conviction” is finally decided. It is also here that the value of starting one’s logic of belief with the resurrection finally becomes apparent, as the content-*full* God we meet here bestows a similar concrete identity on all accounts of God’s presence and acts.

This chapter will therefore continue the focus on the grammatical logic of theological statements, beginning with a consideration of Frei’s rather awkward, ‘negative’ formulation of the identity and presence of Jesus Christ, as he who cannot be thought of as not present. Once again, the relation between theological grammar and ontological actuality will be considered. Given that one of the key aims of *Identity* has been to counter existentialist theology, Rudolf Bultmann’s alternative account of the presence of Christ will represent Frei’s theological ‘opposition’: the focus here will be on Bultmann’s *separation* of the presence of Jesus Christ from his historical or narrative identity, and the problems this raises for theological language and the content of God. As an answer to the existentialist position, Frei’s doctrine of analogy will be considered as a means of predicating concrete, if indirect, content to God. Indeed, this ‘indirectness’ will then be discussed as central to the whole idea of the presence and the person of God, as we consider how Frei balances knowledge of

the concrete content of God with the dialectical rejection of human possession of that knowledge, even in revelation.

Next, this chapter will turn to the mode of the presence of God, which is encompassed within the theological grammar of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The intention is to demonstrate how Frei's starting point in the resurrection should be read as yielding a fully Trinitarian content to God. The unifying role of the Holy Spirit in the church and in history forms the latter part of this chapter and this thesis. Then at the last, Frei's cumulative logic of belief will be shown to be pointing always towards the cumulation of all history in the eschaton, where the presence of Jesus Christ will once again be direct, and the content of God fully rendered.

2. Grammatical Logic and Ontological Proofs

2.1 The Grammatical Necessity of Jesus' Presence

In direct opposition to the existentialist starting point in the presence of Christ to us, Frei insists that the logic of belief, which cannot say everything at once, must begin with Jesus' identity. This is precisely because Jesus' identity, defined grammatically as he who cannot *not* live, necessarily includes his presence:

In the case of this singular individual, manifestation of his identity involves his actual living presence. Who he was and what he was, did, and underwent are all inseparable to the [gospel] authors from the fact *that* he was or is.¹

Indeed, so precisely does the grammar of the resurrection render his identity, that if we "conceive of him as not living", then we have misread the gospels and "misunderstand who he is".² This means that the narrative identity of Jesus Christ is not merely "continuous" into our present, but that that very continuity is in itself "constituent"³ of his identity. There is therefore "a kind of logic in a Christian's faith that forces him to say that disbelief in the resurrection of Jesus is rationally

¹ Frei, "Theological Reflections", 42.

² Frei, *Identity*, 182.

³ *Ibid.* 179.

impossible”.⁴ So relentless is the grammatical logic of the gospel narratives, that, as Paul DeHart explains, for Frei,

the proper way to deny the resurrection is not to say that Jesus Christ was not raised (since the story of his raising is part of how we know who ‘Jesus Christ’ is), but rather to say that the raised Jesus Christ is a fictional person, as opposed to a reconstructed ‘historical’ Jesus of Nazareth.⁵

Not that grammatical logic is in any way the same as ontology: simply stating that Jesus is ‘he who cannot be conceived of as not living’ is not somehow to conjure up his presence. Nevertheless, while the ‘being’ of Jesus Christ is in no way ‘produced’ by the grammar, yet the grammatical form is founded in the content of his identity.⁶

As pointed out in Chapter 2, this description of the presence of Jesus Christ has obvious parallels with the Anselmian ‘proof’ of God – and this despite Frei’s own awareness that “It may be dubious wisdom to make Luke or John speak like a late eleventh-century theologian”.⁷ The problem, however, even with Anselm’s proof, is that even if God is indeed that than which nothing greater can be conceived, then it follows that God therefore *necessarily* has a ‘real’ existence only if one is a thorough-going metaphysical realist. This the existentialist theologians most certainly were not. Hence James Kay’s objection to Frei, that “Frei’s christological deployment of Anselm’s argument assumes with Anselm that we can move from an existent in our thought to that same existent in reality”.⁸ In other words, Kay reads Frei as saying, that because we can *conceive* of the presence of Jesus Christ, it *follows necessarily* that he truly is present. However, neither Frei, nor Barth, nor even Anselm, ever attempts to make the move in this direction, from “thought” to “reality”. Rather, the “move” (and it is God’s move) is made from God’s reality to our thought: the actuality determines the possibility as the subject determines the predicate. This strong actualism in Barth’s case, and hermeneutical realism in Frei’s, is their counter to the *pro nobis* assessment of the reality of God.

⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 183.

⁵ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 116n.15.

⁶ Once again, the category of ‘identity’ is employed as a more useful, less-loaded, and lower-level category than that of ‘being’.

⁷ Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 41.

⁸ Kay, *Christus Praesens*, 136.

Once again, the crucial issue for Frei is the logic of belief. Just because Frei has rejected the ‘backwards’ theological move from presence to identity, that does not mean he can make the ‘forwards’ move with any greater ease. Hence Kay’s deep scepticism that, “by starting with the identity of Jesus Christ one can then move, logically and coherently, to claims for his presence”.⁹ Actually, Frei does not even get that far. His minimal account does not claim that Jesus is *demonstrably* present – only that the Jesus whose identity is narrated in the gospel stories cannot not be present. For Frei the resurrection is merely (merely!) the “necessary local basis”¹⁰ of any talk of Jesus’ presence now. But nevertheless, this ‘leap’ from narrative identity to real presence is hard to account for. This difficulty is at the root of Murphy’s scathing criticism:

Narrative theology fails to renounce foundationalism because it thinks of Christ as an identity rather than as an existent. Sidetracked by its anti-apologetic focus on the unique identity of Christ (as opposed to his historical and ontological particularity), narrative theology backtracks into the epistemic act of identifying its sources.¹¹

However, to think of Jesus as an “identity rather than as an existent” would be once again to work in the wrong order. The “existent” Jesus Christ, then as now, *logically* precedes his narrative identity. However, the “existent” Jesus Christ, then as now, is not *ontologically* anterior to his narrative identity, for that would be to separate subject and predicate and hence posit an abstraction: a Jesus Christ who was somehow other than the “historically and ontologically particular” Jesus of the gospels. Indeed, it is precisely to preserve this particularity that Frei refuses to abstract the some free-floating ontology from Jesus’ storied identity. Therefore, Frei’s reiterated point is that ontology and epistemology – subject and predicate, if you will, or being and action, or *deus* and *dixit*, or however one wishes to put it – simply cannot be separated in this way. We are what we say and do. God is what God says and does.

In comparison to Murphy, Kay’s objection to Frei’s move from identity to presence is not so much metaphysical as pragmatic:

Here where we were promised such a payoff on ‘presence’, if only we would join Frei in taking his arduous trek of first establishing the ‘identity’ of Jesus Christ, we must confess to

⁹ Kay, *Christus Praesens*, 127.

¹⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 77.

¹¹ Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, 63.

disappointment. At the end of the road, we find only a version of Anselm's ontological proof for the existence of God, transposed by Frei onto Jesus Christ.¹²

Kay, a preacher and teacher of homiletics, had expected more of Frei here. He had looked for an *explanation* of the presence of Jesus Christ, one which could perhaps have a pastoral applicability. But in the event, all he got was a mere *basis* for theologising. One can understand Kay's frustration in travelling such a long way with Frei, to find himself only just arriving at the starting line. However, Frei's 'inside faith' perspective precludes the explanatory schemes so beloved of the existential theologians. As he wrote himself, for all that "the affirmation of Jesus' resurrection is ... overwhelmingly affective ("existential")", he could see no reason "for trying to validate either the meaning or the truth claim concerning Jesus' resurrection by an elaborate description of its existential appropriation".¹³ Frei is simply not interested in apologetics: his concern is merely to describe the concrete content of God, and in so doing, to establish the correct order for the logic of belief. His hope for his grammatical 'proof' is merely that it might provide the logical basis for conceptualising Jesus' existential presence.

2.2 The Ontological Non-Necessity of Jesus' Presence

Grammatically, then, Jesus is necessarily present for Frei. Ontologically, however, there is no necessity for him to be present at all, and certainly not as the result of a grammatical formulation. Rather, the use which Frei makes of his christological 'proof' parallels Barth's usage of Anselm's.¹⁴ For Barth, the proof was simply a prolegomena, a grammatical starting point for theology, and not the theological point in itself. Rather, it only when we know God in such a way that "the denial of his Existence becomes impossible"¹⁵, that we can escape the self-referential nature of all human thinking and begin to think about God at all. This is what Alan Torrance describes as "Barth's commitment to the distinction between *theology* and *ontology*

¹² Kay, *Christus Praesens*, 136.

¹³ Frei, "Theological Reflections", 41.

¹⁴ Frei understood Barth's 'discovery' of Anselm's proof to be central to Barth's mature theology, writing in his doctoral thesis that, after 1930, "the pattern of a drastic change in [Barth's] mind became quite clear", as he shifted "away from dialectical theology to a theology of analogy". (Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, 5).

¹⁵ Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum*, 169.

and his refutation of any *universal (pan)* ontology which subsumes both God and humanity within the domains of its principles”.¹⁶ Or, as Barth himself puts it more succinctly, “all thinking about God has to begin with thinking to God”.¹⁷ Frei maintains this same distinction between theology (as doctrinal grammar) and ontology. All he claims for his christological ‘proof’ is that it provides the basis – *and nothing more* – for thinking about Jesus’ presence, and hence the presence also of God. This is because, for Frei, all thinking about the presence of Jesus Christ *to us*, has to begin with a thinking *to him*, to who Jesus was and what he was like.

Hence Frei’s stress on this minimal starting point for theology, predicated upon the resurrection, that Jesus is the one who cannot be conceived of as not present. To start at the other end of the logic of belief – to begin with the existential presence of Christ to us, or with the search for that presence – makes it impossible to work ‘backwards’ to his identity. In Frei’s view, the result of such a scheme is that even the starting point loses reality, so that what we have is not so much the presence of Christ, but something more akin to an absence:

What we come across at the end of that quest is not his own self-focused presence, but a diffused presence that seems strangely elusive and haunting as well as difficult to describe: It is that of ourselves, individually or collectively, seeking to grasp identity from the fear of nonidentity, presence in the midst of the fact and conviction of fleetingness.¹⁸

In other words, while Jesus may indeed be present to us, this presence is not identifiable as *Jesus* if it is posited prior to the establishment of his identity. Indeed, the more absolute forms of existentialism can suggest that his presence is logically *independent* of his identity. Thus we have, for example, Bultmann’s account of the resurrection being true ‘for us’ in the kerygma, while at the same time denying it historical factuality.

Like Schleiermacher, Bultmann accords a very minimal significance to the historical events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth, although for a very different reason. Bultmann’s demythologising programme necessarily asserts that we can know

¹⁶ Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communication: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 248.

¹⁷ Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum*, 169.

¹⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 186.

almost nothing about Jesus Christ other than that he lived and died. This is not to underplay how vital this life and death is to Bultmann's theology: Jesus is "the One who is the crisis, the turning point, of the age",¹⁹ and there is no substituting his uniqueness. In this, Bultmann neatly illustrates Frei's observation regarding Niebuhr, that existentialism is always seeking to negotiate between "a present internal impact and a stubborn historical fact".²⁰ However, for the existentialist theologian, it is the "present impact" which is "our first certainty".²¹ Therefore, for Bultmann, the 'presence of Christ' refers first and foremost to the "kerygmatic eschatological salvation event".²² Therefore he disagreed strongly with attempts to harmonise the 'historical' account of the identity of Jesus in the gospels with the Christ who is present to us today in the faith encounter: "the word of God is Word of God only as it happens here and now".²³

In this conception of revelation, Bultmann is indebted to Barth's distinctive model, which was designed to preserve the character of revelation as 'event':

In the resurrection, the new world of the Holy Spirit touches the old world of the flesh. But it touches it as a tangent touches a circle, that is, without touching it. And, precisely because it does not touch it, it touches it as its frontier, as the new world.²⁴

This concept of "intersection", which "is no more extended onto the known plane than is the unknown plane of which it proclaims the existence"²⁵, is designed to forestall any understanding of revelation as immanent: rather, revelation is the one-dimensional point, the moment without extension in time or space, so that in itself it has no content. In other words, what we have once again is a grammatical "frontier" for theology, and nothing more. However, what existentialist theology does, is transpose revelation from being the indispensable but contentless *ground* of theology, to being the *content* of theology itself. Moreover, where Barth locates revelation primarily in the past-tense event of Jesus Christ – God *has spoken* – the

¹⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, "On the Question of Christology [1927]", in Robert W. Funk, ed., *Faith and Understanding*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1969, 116–144), 137.

²⁰ Frei, "Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 74.

²¹ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 140.

²² Kay, *Christus Praesens*, 126.

²³ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 82.

²⁴ Barth, *Romans*, 30.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 29.

existentialist understanding of this moment of intersection is determinedly present. This means that the theologian is obliged to speak of Jesus Christ only in terms of what he is doing in the present historical moment, to us and in us. Bultmann therefore locates revelation in the “repeatedly present”²⁶ kerygmatic event: Jesus is “the Crucified and Risen One, (who) encounters us in the word of proclamation, *and nowhere else*”.²⁷ Hence Bultmann can preach in his 1938 Advent sermon, that “A miracle is in fact in every deed ... and every event where the Spirit and the mind of Christ hold sway. And where does Christ hold sway? Wherever the Word of the Gospel is preached and heard in faith.”²⁸

In this scheme, the gospel narratives can have little significance to one who has separated out in such a wholesale fashion the Jesus of history and the theologically (or existentially) significant Jesus. Bultmann is scathing in his critique of a contemporary publication, *Jesus Christus der Herr* by Emanuel Hirsch²⁹, which he reads as representative of the outdated liberal tradition of Wilhelm Herrmann. According to Bultmann, Hirsch’s ‘error’ was to insist that Jesus Christ was an objective historical figure, who nevertheless becomes “contemporary” for us as we reconstruct his personality through psychological analysis of the gospel texts.³⁰

Bultmann’s ripost is telling:

But does this mean ‘contemporary’ as Kierkegaard meant it? Does it mean contemporaneous in the present time? No, it is merely timelessness ... Jesus so regarded never confronts us as ‘Thou’. A *Thou* who demands something of us with a concrete claim upon our conscience can only be a Thou confronting us in today’s concrete present. In relation to a *Thou* in the past, the most that is possible is the perception of a moral demand that is timeless ... The historical Jesus does not make any direct demand on us...³¹

Ironically, for all Hirsch’s attention to the details of gospel history, Bultmann regards his portrayal of Jesus as an “abstraction”, given that the Jesus of history is now so distant from us that “all the features are heightened to the absolute and thus lose their

²⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Gifford Lectures 1955*, (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 152.

²⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 39. (my italics)

²⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *This World and the Beyond: Marburg Sermons*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), 108.

²⁹ Emanuel Hirsch, *Jesus Christus der Herr*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926).

³⁰ See Bultmann, “Question of Christology”, 124.

³¹ *Ibid.* 126.

individual character. What finally results,” Bultmann writes damningly, “is a wholly formal ideal which has been coloured by a kind of aesthetic contemplation.”³²

What we have now is a confusion of vocabulary – and of conceptuality. Frei has accused the existentialist account itself of ‘abstraction’, for divorcing Jesus’ presence from his gospel identity. Bultmann, however, does not regard his account of Jesus’ presence as abstract in the slightest. Indeed, his very project is to counter all such abstraction, whether this is the abstraction of Jesus’ personality that he detected in Hirsch, or the abstraction of the Christ of Faith from the Jesus of History. As David Fergusson explains:

Against Schleiermacher *et al.*, Bultmann can maintain that it is unnecessary to discern the inner consciousness of Jesus or to compile his biography. Against the Hegelian left, he can prevent a complete dissociation of faith from history by maintaining that a commitment to Jesus is governed by belief in the cross as the historical source of our salvation.³³

Bultmann is therefore as concerned as Frei to avoid metaphysical speculation, and so refuses to let go entirely the historical account, locating the eschatological turning point of all history and of our own individual salvation in the concrete historical event that was the cross. Indeed, he wishes to maintain an account of the cross *both* as an historically-past existential event for Jesus, *and* as an historically-present existential event for us. As Fergusson clarifies elsewhere:

To the historian this [the cross] is simply another world occurrence with an historical explanation. Yet for the believer it becomes God’s eschatological action as it is acknowledged in personal faith.³⁴

As Frei has observed, this is yet another example of the historically-past occurrence being the “necessary local basis” of the historically-present revelation event. The ‘concrete’ matters to Bultmann just as much as it does to Frei. However, where Frei locates the ‘concrete’ in the historical narrative, Bultmann locates the ‘concrete’ in the present existential moment, which is also fully historical. For Bultmann, it is the narrative which is the abstraction.

³² Bultmann, “Question of Christology”, 129.

³³ David Fergusson, “Jesus and the Faith-History Problem Today”, in Stuart George Hall, ed., *Jesus Christ Today: Studies of Christology in Various Contexts* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009, 265–281), 275.

³⁴ David Fergusson, *Bultmann*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 111.

Frei agrees with Bultmann, that the ‘liberal’ account of the presence of Jesus Christ is indeed a weak one. However, Bultmann’s ‘solution’ is less than satisfactory. Where Schleiermacher did at least assert a vital continuity between Jesus then and Jesus now, Frei’s insight is that Bultmann has effectively divorced the presence of Jesus from his historical and storied identity.

Other than this ‘encounter’ we can assert nothing clearly about Jesus Christ: all that a ‘contemporaneous decision’ needs is the completely formal, positivistic claim that Jesus Christ did once exist in human particularity.³⁵

Moreover, when we try to label the existential encounter ‘Jesus Christ’, or to explain in what manner he can be said to be present; then in the absence of content to this event of revelation we are reduced to describing its effect on us. In this way Niebuhr can write how “I am being believed in, therefore I believe”³⁶: a statement perhaps of profound faith, but one which proffers no knowledge of who or what it is, that is doing the believing. Moreover, for all that it tries to say something about *God*, grammatically, the subject of the sentence remains “I”. Hence Frei’s perception that to begin with Christ’s presence *to* us is in fact to begin *with* us, so that revelation provides us with no knowledge whatsoever of God’s content, but merely increases out knowledge of ourselves. The result is what Frei calls “sheer epistemological agnosticism with regard to Jesus of Nazareth”³⁷, as his identity, along with his presence, is “diffused” throughout the multitude of identities of those to whom he is present. In addition, given Frei’s point that the identity of God cannot be described apart from the identity of the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth, (for without the resurrection not only is Jesus not Jesus, but God is not God), the result is an even more profound epistemological agnosticism when it comes to the content of God. Unsurprisingly, then, Bultmann writes about the “invisibility of God”, which “excludes every myth which tries to make God and His action visible”.³⁸ Such ‘myths’ include Jesus.

³⁵ Frei, “Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr”, 111.

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 140; cited in Frei, “Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr”, 74.

³⁷ Frei, “Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr”, 111.

³⁸ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 83–4.

3. Speaking about the Content of God

3.1 The Unknowable God

This concept of Jesus, and therefore of God, as essentially unknowable and unknown³⁹ even in self-revelation, is not a problem for the existentialist theologian. Quite the contrary: this unknowability is the *point*. Where Schleiermacher could speak of the immanence of God in the universal God-consciousness, the existentialist theologian can speak only of the absence of God. Niebuhr, for example, locates God's revelation in the human need for God: our God-consciousness, such as it is, is the consciousness of not having God. In other words, even when God reveals, that revelation is of God's absence; and so what we know in revelation is not God, but ourselves as apart from God. This is not to say that Niebuhr, any more than Bultmann, understands God to be a mere psychological phenomenon, having existence only as God is experienced. On the contrary, as Bultmann qualifies:

From the statement that to speak of God is to speak of myself, it by no means follows that God is not outside the believer.⁴⁰

Nor does Bultmann equate experience with emotion, observing caustically that "faith which is born of such an emotion is ultimately a faith in myself."⁴¹ Existentialist theology insists throughout upon the reality of God. It is simply that this reality cannot be approached from the human end of the absolute dialectic, for God's revelation-to-us is not to be equated with God's *self*-revelation. A wedge has been inserted between the *deus* and the *dixit*, so that in God's essence, God remains unknowable.

However, Bultmann does have an epistemological dimension to his theology, and it is precisely this: that "de-mythologising is the radical application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the sphere of knowledge and thought".⁴² The dialectic

³⁹ As Bultmann expressed it in his 1951 Shaffer lectures, "The understanding of God as creator is genuine only when I understand myself here and now as the creature of God. This existential understanding does not need to express itself in my consciousness as explicit knowledge." Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 63.

⁴⁰ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 70.

⁴¹ Bultmann, "Question of Christology", 124.

⁴² Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 84. Fergusson explains this as "the extension of the Pauline-Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith to the realm of epistemology". Fergusson, "Jesus and the Faith-History Problem today", 275.

between humanity and the ‘wholly other’ God ensures that revelation, like faith, is always a gift and never a possession. As such, it “destroys every longing for security”⁴³ and ensures that we can never reason our way to God, any more than we can work our way to salvation. The moment we accept that – the moment we realise our absolute profanity – is the moment, paradoxically, of faith. Indeed, it is the ultimate insight of faith, to know that God is utterly unknowable. For Bultmann, this unknowability *is* the content of God.

So God-in-Godself is unknown and unknowable for the existentialist theologians. Nevertheless, they are able to talk confidently about the moment of revelation as the presence of Jesus Christ to us. Indeed, it is precisely the presence of Christ which confronts us paradoxically with the absence of God, as dramatised so paradigmatically on the Cross. Thus it is the presence of Christ which constitutes the revelatory starting point for the whole existentialist theological system.

However, the existentialist theologians have difficulty in maintaining what Frei calls the “identity of God *with himself* when he is God for us”.⁴⁴ In other words, they struggle to hold together the separate, “fleeting” moments of revelation in which Christ confronts us. This is because their lack of an account of the identity of Jesus Christ *with himself* means that his identity then becomes “diffused” across these countless moments of intersection, each containing not the fullness of the self-revealing God, but only a minute fraction of who Jesus was and is. Hence Frei’s awareness of the ‘tragedy’ of the existentialist logic of belief – a tragedy which is detectable even in Bultmann’s own description:

In these ‘experiences’ we are always being questioned, being put to the test. We cannot possess them; we ‘have’ them only in action. But in that act, the more genuinely we grasp the experiences, the more uncertain and doubtful of ourselves do we become.⁴⁵

Bultmann is at pains to stress that the loss of self is precisely what leads us to dependence upon the grace of God. But even so, there is a link between the lack of a concrete identity for Jesus Christ, and the loss of our own identity. The fleeting

⁴³ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 84.

⁴⁴ Frei, “Niebuhr’s Theological Background”, 51. (my italics)

⁴⁵ Bultmann, “Question of Christology”, 140.

moments of God's revelation fragment our knowledge not merely of God, but also of ourselves: as Jesus' identity is diffused into his presence-to-us, so too our identity, which images his, struggles to maintain its self-focus. Hence in the existentialist scheme, our "fear of nonidentity" is a very real fear indeed, for the unity of all our separate moments of existence relies utterly on the unity which Christ gives to us, not to mention the unity which, in the figurative scheme, he gives also to time. It is Frei's insight that these fleeting moments of revelation can be held together only in the *person* of Jesus Christ, whose identity as the one who cannot be thought of as not living unites past and present, history and faith. That is why it is only once this identity has been established, that talk about his presence can begin. And it is only as this presence is *abiding* (though not immanent, and not possessed), that the unity of our own fleeting existential experiences in one self-focussed and continuous self can be established and maintained.

In summary then, to begin the logic of belief with Jesus' presence *to us*, is to begin *with us*, in all our tragic contingency and separation from God. Then it is to suggest that Jesus' own identity is akin to ours, and equally tragic: that he too suffers from the same contingency and dialectical separation from God that characterise the human condition. Thus, while Niebuhr, Bultmann, and Tillich would all agree that Jesus is the revelation of God, their real problem is that Jesus himself is unfindable. He is the stranger, and not the friend; he is a fleeting encounter rather than an abiding presence; and so his existential self, if known at all, is known only to himself, and is hidden from us. And given the coincidence that Frei has established between the identity of Jesus Christ and the content of God, this means that there is no way for us to speak concretely about God: the storied God of the Bible is once again reduced to an abstraction.

3.2 The Personhood of God

Frei's contention is that a realistic narrative reading of the resurrection accounts indicates that God has made Godself known in Jesus Christ. Therefore, in direct

opposition to the existentialist position, Frei insists that in Jesus Christ, the content of God has “descriptive availability”⁴⁶:

The concept of identity will involve ... an affirmation that the singular and true identity of a person is mysteriously and yet significantly manifest and therefore accessible, rather than being a remote and ineffable, unknown quantity.⁴⁷

However, dialectical theology raises an objection at this point. For Schleiermacher, Barth, and the Neo-Orthodox alike, dialectical theology starts with the insistence, that any epistemological venture must first of all ringfence God’s absolute subjecthood. The difficulty then becomes how to talk about God in such a way that the dialectic is maintained, when the most logical response to God’s sovereign governance of God’s own predicates is silence. To some extent, this worry explains Schleiermacher’s preferred focus on our consciousness of God, rather than on God in Godself. It also explains Bultmann’s stress on the absence and unknowability of God even in the moment of revelation. Barth answers this problem with an account of a God who is sovereign subject, but who yet in gracious revelation has opened up “the impossible possibility” that “the unknown can as such become an object of knowledge”.⁴⁸ This means that the “descriptive availability” of God in Frei’s account of revelation is an option for Barth, but is no option at all for Bultmann or Schleiermacher.

The task facing Frei’s theological grammar is therefore how to balance the principle of the “descriptive availability” of the content of God, with the dialectical axiom, that God is sovereign and free. In the light of that freedom, revelation cannot be pinned down in human language; yet the accounts of the resurrection clearly show, that to speak of Jesus is to speak of God, as God’s inseparable predicate. Indeed, to allocate God and Jesus to these grammatical categories is almost an irrelevance: in the resurrection, something more akin to a shared subjecthood is being posited, as Jesus is manifested as the ‘self’ of God. Even with the caveat of not loading too much ontological weight onto a grammatical formulation, this should still mean that what is predicable of the identity of Jesus is predicable also of the content of God.

⁴⁶ Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 32.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 15.

⁴⁸ Barth, *Romans*, 79.

Accordingly, given that in the resurrection, God is manifested in the actual, bodily, presence of Jesus, this means for Frei that we now have divine permission to predicate personhood to God. Moreover, having revealed thus, it is now unthinkable that God could have done so in any other medium; which means in turn that it is unthinkable *not* to think of God as eternally personal. As Barth puts it, the bodily resurrection is “not only His reality for us – certainly that – but at the same time His own, inner, proper reality, behind which and above which there is no other.”⁴⁹ Frei notes that, where christocentric theologians such as Schleiermacher were happy to attribute the actuality of the “incarnate Reconciliation” to “the free grace of God”⁵⁰, Barth is almost a lone voice in insisting that not only the *actuality*, but also the *possibility* and the *need* for redemption can be explained “*solely* from the event itself”.⁵¹ Frei describes Barth on the incarnation, in terms that could just as easily be applied to his own account of the resurrection:

The ground of the actuality of the incarnation, of its ontological possibility, and of our being able to think about it, are one and the same.⁵²

For Frei, as for Barth, nothing can be stated, and nothing can be known about God, outside of what God has revealed in the historical and narrative actuality of Jesus Christ.

For Frei, then, the ‘personhood’ of God is a relatively straightforward proposition. However, for the existentialist theologian, the issue is considerably more complex. Dialectical theology insists that any epistemological venture must as a starting point ringfence the absolute subjecthood of God. As an acting ‘subject’, this means that God must rightfully be called a ‘person’, as opposed to some mere metaphysical entity, for if revelation is “*the ‘I-Thou encounter’ par excellence*”⁵³, then as Buber argues, only a person can be known as ‘Thou’. However, although revelation is the meeting of ‘persons’, this is no meeting of equals – God as Absolute Subject has a freedom and power which we dependent subjects can never have. Nevertheless, existentialist theology can posit a kind of *analogia entis* between the two subjects.

⁴⁹ Barth, *CD III/1*, 262.

⁵⁰ Frei, “Karl Barth: Theologian”, 173.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* (my italics)

⁵² *Ibid.* 171.

⁵³ Frei, “Religion (Natural and Revealed)”, 318.

Not that we can say that God is *ontologically* a ‘person’ as such – for existentialist theologians, that would be to posit an illegitimately-derived and speculative content to God. But nevertheless, God is a ‘person’ *to us*, when confronted in faith. Thus revelation comes to us not as any abstract or historically distant event, but concretely, specifically, and immediately, in the meeting of a Person with a person. Indeed, the event of revelation to us is precisely that which, at epistemologically-speaking, makes God a ‘person’.

For Bultmann, it follows from our experience of God as personal that we are permitted to use the analogy of a ‘person’ to describe God:

When we speak of God as acting, we mean that we are confronted with God, addressed, asked, judged, or blessed by God. Therefore to speak in this manner is not to speak in symbols or images, but to speak analogically. For when we speak in this manner of God as acting, we conceive God’s action as an analogue to the actions taking place between men. ... it is in this analogical sense that we call Him Father. We are not only justified in speaking thus, but we must do so, since we are now not speaking of an idea about God, but of God Himself.⁵⁴

This concept of analogy has the advantage of outlawing metaphysical or speculative statements, and of grounding theology in the actual subject-to-subject encounter: “God is a personal being acting on persons”.⁵⁵ However, such analogical speech also has its limits. One of them – of which Bultmann and Niebuhr are highly aware – is the danger of anthropomorphism: we may think we are talking about God, when once again we are talking about ourselves “in a loud voice”.⁵⁶ However, and more importantly for our purposes, at the core of Bultmann’s concept of analogy is a deep sense of the failure of human language to talk about God. As Bultmann understands it in the citation above, the description of God as ‘Father’ is valid only if one understands first of all that God is *not* ‘Father’; it is valid only if one understands first of all that the predicate essentially *fails* to describe God. The problem for Christian existentialism is that the wedge that it has driven between epistemology and ontology, between God’s revelation-to-us and God *an sich*, means that we cannot hold our experience of God as a ‘person’ to be ontologically true. Indeed, the insistence on the unknowability of God means that, while affirming that God is truly

⁵⁴ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 68–9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 70.

⁵⁶ The full citation is “one can *not* speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice”. Barth, *The Word of God and The Word of Man*, 196.

a person when confronted in faith, Bultmann must simultaneously deny that our experience truly refers. As a means of speaking about God, analogy has failed Bultmann.

The implications of this failure of analogy are yet wider. The problem, for Bultmann as for Tillich, is that Jesus himself is on the wrong side of the dialectic, in his own way as alienated from God as we are. Indeed, the fact that Jesus is a person means quite simply that he is *not God*; that there is no co-incidence between his being and God's. God's revelation he certainly was and is, but in the existentialist scheme, revelation can reveal to us truths only about our own selves: under no revelatory circumstances can we ever "speak of what God is in Himself", but can only ever speak "of what He is doing to us and with us."⁵⁷ So for all Bultmann's consideration of analogy, Frei is right when he says that analogy is simply not an option for existentialist theologians.⁵⁸ It does not help them in any way to talk about God.

Frei therefore detects a great abstract hole at the heart of existentialist dialectical theology, which is the lack of content to God. Moreover, as explained in Chapter 2, he traces this lacuna back to Barth's early theology, and its starting point in the doctrine of revelation, posited without the essential content of the identity of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Mike Higton identifies the issue as follows:

Barth had somehow managed, Frei thought, to make this incarnational assertion without paying detailed attention to Jesus Christ's actual historical humanity ... if we follow this effectively monophysite approach we make the catching up of Christ's history into God an abstract marker, intelligible without reference to the content that is caught up, which could in principle have been placed beside any historical content whatsoever.⁵⁹

The lack of content in Barth's ontological starting point was compounded, or perhaps confirmed, by the dialectic's denial of the human ability to speak of God. For Barth himself this was not an insuperable problem, for even in the midst of the fierce dialectic of *Der Römerbrief*, he had a positive as well as a negative account of God's interaction with humanity: "The 'Yes' of God illuminates the place where His 'No'

⁵⁷ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 73.

⁵⁸ The comment is actually made with reference to Niebuhr. See Frei, "Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 77, 83.

⁵⁹ Higton, *Christ, Providence, and History*, 6.

is complete and radical as the divine negation”.⁶⁰ However, for his fellow dialectical theologians, the Christian existentialists, the “No” of God sounded a whole lot louder than the “Yes”, so that God’s own self effectively cancels out even that analogical language which God’s self-revelation has permitted.

Of course, Frei forgives Barth this early abstraction, in that he reads him as later ‘turning to analogy’, and thus demonstrating how it is possible, despite the dialectic, to speak truly of the content of God. Whether or not Frei has misread Barth on this supposed ‘turn’⁶¹, it remains true that Barth can talk positively about God where Bultmann cannot. This is because, even if the early Barth was wrong to begin with a contentless positing of the *deus dixit*, he at least held the *deus* and the *dixit* together, refusing to separate the subject from the predicate. In addition, Barth presents a concept of a God who has revealed to us in Jesus Christ; and given that this is so, “in the predicate and object of the concept of revelation we must have ... the subject itself. Revelation and revealing must be equal to the revealer”.⁶² Therefore, as Frei observes, “there must be a correspondence in predicable qualities between him and his creatures”⁶³: not on the basis of any *analogia entis* (the dialectic is still absolute), but on the basis of an analogy established by grace to faith – the *analogia fidei*.⁶⁴

Perhaps, though, the main differences between the Barthian dialectic, the existentialist dialectic, and Frei’s own version, can be summed up as follows. Barth starts with the contentless but logical and grammatical point: that we can speak about God only *because of* God’s revelation. Bultmann recognises rightly the contentless nature of this doctrine of revelation, but illegitimately transfers what for Barth is

⁶⁰ Barth, *Romans*, 402.

⁶¹ McCormack’s thesis in *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* is that Barth never abandoned dialectic for analogy, as von Balthasar claimed and as Frei assumed: “The turning point in this development away from dialectical theology toward a theology of analogy is Barth’s book on Anselm of Canterbury’s *Proslogium*.” (Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 6.) McCormack argues that the dialectic remained the primary assumption which conditioned all Barth’s talk of analogy, so that it never ceased to be the foundation of all Barth’s theologising. In McCormack’s view, von Balthasar had misread Barth, and the shame was that the misreading had become normative for Barth studies.

⁶² Barth, *CD I/1*, 353.

⁶³ Frei, “Niebuhr’s Theological Background”, 52.

⁶⁴ Barth, *CD I/1*, 12.

mere grammatical prolegomena across into the realm of epistemology. Hence Bultmann insists that we cannot talk about God *despite* God's revelation. Frei, however, counsels that the doctrine of revelation be recognised for the contentless grammatical statement it is. As such, it has a logical function in theology, but does not in itself provide any content to God. Rather, it is only in exegesis that this grammatical "frontier" – that God reveals – becomes a true predicate of God. In other words, once again we have simultaneity rather than priority: while logically our prolegomena is *deus dixit*, in actuality we derive this starting point – this *hypothesis* – from exegesis. For if Jesus Christ is indeed the content of God, then there can be no valid talk about God apart from that content; and nor can there be any leaping over that narrative starting point to a more general prolegomena.

3.3 Frei's Doctrine of Analogy

By speaking first about the identity of Jesus Christ, Frei is able to predicate personhood to God, where ultimately, Bultmann and Niebuhr can only insist on God's unknowability. However, that is not to say that Frei envisages any kind of absolute knowledge of God in revelation. Perhaps surprisingly, Frei himself has an understanding, although predicated quite differently from the existentialist one, of the essential unknowability of God. Where starting at the 'wrong' end of the logic of belief renders a God who is unknowable, even starting at the 'right' end does not mean that the knowledge of God will fall complete into our grasping hands.

For Frei, the dialectic still holds: there is no human way of 'producing' Jesus through reading, preaching, or faith. This was the error of the New Hermeneutic, which picked up on Bultmann's location of the resurrection in the 'kerygma', stating that "in the proclamation of the resurrection the historical Jesus himself has come to us".⁶⁵ This led to their conviction that human language has an inherent revelatory capacity, which means that revelation 'happens' whenever the 'myths' of the Bible

⁶⁵ Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus*, (London: SCM Press, 1964), 30–1.

are ‘translated’ into contemporary conceptuality and idiom. In Fuchs’ words:

God’s revelation consists simply in God’s letting men state God’s own problems in their language, in grace and judgement.⁶⁶

By contrast, Frei refuses to allow to even his preferred ‘realistic narrative’ hermeneutic this power of ‘producing’ the experience or knowledge of God. AS he explains in emphatic italics, “*Reenactment can no more make him present than the passage of time can bear him way.*”⁶⁷ In a later essay, Frei takes pains to correct this misreading of his earlier work. Here he distances himself from any association with New Criticism, a movement in literary criticism which held that the literary meaning of a text need not concern itself with the concept of an external truth, so that a text can be totally self-referential.⁶⁸ Frei perceives that, while New Criticism suspends the question as to whether *truth* is generally accessible, it assumes nevertheless that *meaning* is a general class, accessible “to all reasonable people who know how to relate genus, species, and individual case properly”.⁶⁹ In the case of the gospels, this would mean that God was generally available to anyone who knew how to read – clearly an unacceptable premise in the light of Frei’s rejection of system and of general revelation. The medium is not the thing.

On the contrary, Frei contends that, even as the gospels reveal the identity of Jesus Christ, they simultaneously conceal it. Frei’s “intention-action” scheme is balanced

⁶⁶ Ernst Fuchs, “The New Testament and the Hermeneutical Problem”, in *New Frontiers in Theology II: The New Hermeneutic*, edited by James M. Robinson and J. M. Cobb (New York: Harper & Row, 1964: 111–45), 135–6.

⁶⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 200.

⁶⁸ New Criticism was a literary movement which crossed over into biblical hermeneutics as a counterpoint to the New Hermeneutic. As represented in Frei’s time by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, among others, New Criticism argued like Frei, that meaning was to be located in and with a text, and not somewhere ‘behind’ it. As Frei himself describes their project, the interpreter must “above all, leave (the texts) as they are and not translate into some didactic ‘meaning’ by way of prose paraphrase”. (Frei, “Literal Reading”, 124.) See W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1970).

The similarities to Frei’s position are obvious. However, Frei deals with New Criticism at some length in “Literal Reading”, where he concludes that for all its anti-existentialist appearance, New Criticism is yet another instantiation of an old-style ‘liberal’ hermeneutic, in that it too seeks to impose a “universally valid pattern of interpretation” (125) on the biblical narratives. He takes up the issue again, though indirectly, in *Types of Christian Theology*, where he rejects “Type 5” as “logically equivalent to sheer repetition of the same words”. The result would be “a theology of total silence” (55). Thus he conclusively rejects the New Criticism approach – though it perhaps took him some time to do so.

⁶⁹ Frei, “Literal Reading”, 140.

by his “self-manifestation” category, in which there is a stable and continuous ‘self’ which unites all the moment-by-moment intended-acts:

Self-manifestation description ... tries to point to the continuity of a person’s identity throughout the transitions brought about by his acts and life’s events.⁷⁰

As discussed in Chapter 3, this core ‘self’, which ensures the continuity of identity, has three specific qualities: it possesses “persistence, elusiveness, and ultimacy”.⁷¹ The first category of “persistence” refers to the continuity of a Self in time, “from action to action” and throughout all changes and even contradictions in identity. This “persistence” of Jesus’ identity as the revelation of God provides the counterweight to the intersecting and fleeting ‘moment’ of revelation in the dialectical scheme, while also encompassing the changes to the person of Jesus brought about by the resurrection. The third category of “ultimate” stresses another point we have made, that we cannot abstract Jesus’ qualities and actions from the Jesus who possesses or performs them: he is, and they are, unsubstitutable.

However, the interest when it comes to the personhood of God is in the second category. Frei insists that the core and continuous self which is truly manifested in our intended actions is nevertheless “elusive”, not merely to other people, but also to the actual self which is being manifested. As he points out, “one’s own acts *now* cannot become objects of knowledge to oneself until they have receded into the past”.⁷² To do otherwise would be somehow to step outside of oneself when no such detached viewpoint is available. This is true even of God, in the sense that the concept of God stepping outside of Godself is nonsensical – although it would be unwise to stretch the analogy further than this. And as for humans, who are not all-in-all, it is simply an impossibility. This means that the very persistent and ultimate resurrected identity which guarantees Jesus’ presence to us, guarantees also that his abiding presence can never be known directly by us, precisely because it is a *present* happening. For Frei, then, beyond the fleetingness of the dialectical moment, our attempts to make a possession of God are frustrated by the fact that even an abiding presence is a *presence*, and not a past event.

⁷⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 165.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 138.

⁷² *Ibid.* 138–9.

As a present event, the self is therefore never fully available to the knowing subject, but can only be described “indirectly, i.e., in and through its manifestation”.⁷³ It must be emphasised that, although indirect, it is nevertheless *truly* the self which is manifested: God’s revelation is complete, even if we do not thereby know God completely. Accordingly, Frei rejects utterly the concept of “the self seen in alienation from its manifestation”, but counsels rather that we should think of “a complex of *indirect* identity between the self and its manifestation”.⁷⁴ It is true that Jesus is identified by what he does and undergoes; it is true likewise that God is identified by what God does and undergoes in Jesus Christ. However, we must remember once again that the ‘medium’ is not the ‘thing’. As was established in Chapter 3, just because the identity of Jesus Christ is revealed through the medium of a story, that does not mean that Jesus has no reality apart from the story. Likewise, even though God reveals in the ‘medium’ of a human person, so that we may fittingly and accurately speak of God as a ‘person’, this does not mean that God is, in a simple sense, a human person. Thus Frei cautions:

The believer must abide by the New Testament’s complex rather than simple identification of God and Jesus – an identification that can only be narrated...⁷⁵

This complexity of identity means for us that, although the identity of the God’s self with God’s manifestation is *true*, it is simultaneously indirect and is most fitly described analogically.

Although the medium of revelation is certainly not God *an sich*, nevertheless, as we have established, the form is founded in the content. One might paraphrase these two observations of Frei’s as follows: while the medium which God chose for revelation – person and Word – is not to be correlated *directly* with the being of God, yet in choosing to reveal in the *form* of person and of Word, God has provided us with true knowledge of God’s content. That Jesus is a person means that we can rightly, if analogically, think of God as a person. At the same time, if Jesus’ self is “elusive”, then we can legitimately read his elusiveness as a revelation of the epistemological elusiveness of God. We can read Jesus as revelatory of God because

⁷³ Frei, *Identity*, 141.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* (my italics)

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 193.

the content of God as a ‘person’ grounds God’s ‘choice’ of Jesus of Nazareth as the form of revelation. Once again, this is no “pressing back” of the personhood of Jesus into the being of God, but is rather a ‘working forward’, from the personal God to the inseparable predicate. As Nicolas Wolterstorff puts it, “God speaks by way of a human being only if God is that human being – Jesus Christ”.⁷⁶ Therefore, while the medium is not the thing, yet the medium is governed by the thing as the predicate is governed by the subject; and this to the point that God’s identity is so utterly inseparable from Jesus of Nazareth, that it can be predicated in no other way.

This self-chosen availability of God to us, in human and narrative form, is at the base of Frei’s doctrine of analogy. A doctrine of analogy does not do away with the dialectic: indeed, the dialectical separation of God and world is at the core of any understanding of analogy, for any more immanent account of revelation renders God directly available, and so does away with the need for analogy at all:

Analogy ... takes place wholly within and on the basis of dialectic. It has no independent position of its own.⁷⁷

At this point, let us concede to Bruce McCormack, that Frei may well have taken too readily on board von Balthasar’s thesis, that Barth had turned *from* dialectic *to* analogy.⁷⁸ Be that as it may, and whatever the implications for Barth scholarship, Frei himself embraces analogy, not just because he thought Barth did, but because of his own understanding, that it takes a doctrine of analogy to turn the dialectic’s vital grammatical negation into a positive description of the content of God. As he himself explained, it is only with such a doctrine in place that “knowledge and object correspond to one another positively, even though God in his revelation is only the indirect object of reflection”.⁷⁹ Frei is fully aware that the dialectic remains *logically* prior to all positive analogical statement; but in actuality, the dialectic has no ontological reality that can be separated from analogy. In other words, the understanding that we cannot speak directly of the being of God is given to us *in and*

⁷⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 70.

⁷⁷ Frei, *Doctrine of Revelation*, 522–3.

⁷⁸ Although it is also clear that Frei does not read Barth as rejecting the dialectic altogether: in an early essay he wrote instead about a “de-emphasis (though perhaps not complete rejection) of the dialectical method”. See Frei, “Niebuhr’s Theological Background”, 52.

⁷⁹ Frei, “Niebuhr’s Theological Background”, 50.

with the God-given ability for human language analogically to describe God's identity in Jesus Christ. After all, if we could speak directly of God, then we would have no need of Jesus, or indeed, of any revelation. Hence Frei's entire project: the establishment of the starting point for all subsequent talk about God in the identity of Jesus Christ.

In sum, Frei's depiction of the identity of God in Jesus Christ renders an account of God in which God has simultaneously revealed and hidden Godself. Where Barth had his concept of the veiling and unveiling of God in Christ, once again Frei grounds this insight in the gospel narratives, in which the identity of Jesus Christ is truly revealed through his intended actions, while at the same time the subject-self which binds them all together is not directly available to us. Indeed, as long as the self is a *present* reality, that self will escape our grasp. The hermeneutical spotlight can certainly be turned upon the past event of the cross and resurrection, and in doing so, can truly identify Jesus as the Crucified and Risen One: this is the sense in which Frei insists that the identity of Jesus is available to believer and nonbeliever alike. Nevertheless, the sense in which these past revelatory events are not simply fleeting dialectical moments in history, but abiding, eternal, *present* events, is beyond the scope of objective description. Therefore, the assumption of the existentialist theologians is itself wrongheaded, that even though God *an sich* is epistemologically unavailable, they can at least describe the present encounter with God: such a description would be for us to step outside of our own "elusive" selves. Rather, even if we can truly describe the existential encounter with God, we can still only ever describe it as a *past* event – which, in Bultmann's own terms, is an abstraction.

This is the series of tensions by means of which Frei seeks to do justice both to the revelation of God to creation, and to the essential dialectical separation between the two. The alternative to a doctrine of analogy is the annihilation, not of God's absolute subjectivity, but of ours, for of the two 'persons' meeting here in the moment of revelation, the attribute of 'reality' rightly belongs to God. Bultmann admits this, but dismisses it as illegitimately "transcendent" talk.⁸⁰ Instead, he

⁸⁰ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 66.

predicates any analogical talk about the personhood of God on our own personhood, rather than on Jesus'. However, as Frei points out, the grammatical logic of belief must work in the other direction: it is God who defines God's own predicates, and in the process also defines ours:

If the concept of 'personhood' describes God as well as man, it is man who stands in need of analogical explanation, and not God – who is in himself fully the content of person: he is *this* particular person, the particular act of being and self-originating purposive event who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As this person, this concrete identity of being and meaning, he is the Creator of all contingent being and value and meaning. We cannot go behind the Triune God for a notion of being, meaning, or value. For he is, as this person, pure act, pure aseity ... His personhood is therefore defined by and in himself – and not in the first place either in positive relation to or distinction from (negative relation to) the creature.⁸¹

Once again, Frei has demonstrated how the error of existentialism is to start at the wrong end of the linear logic of belief. That Jesus could redefine all human predicates is because he and God are one subject, as the resurrection reveals. It is therefore God who defines humanity, and not humanity that defines God.

4. The Mode of the Presence of God

4.1 The Holy Spirit

To say that Jesus Christ cannot not be, that who he is constrains the imagination to acknowledge him as present, that in him identity and presence are given together completely as one – to say all these things is not yet to say anything specifically about his presence.⁸²

In the epilogue of his christological study, Frei's task is precisely to say something "specific" about the presence of Jesus Christ. If he fails to do so, then he has not demonstrated that his logic of belief actually works. It is one thing to illustrate how beginning with presence cannot lead to identity; but the proof of his alternative hypothesis will be whether beginning with identity can lead to presence. Moreover, this 'presence' cannot stop at a grammatically negative formulation, but must be describable in terms every bit as concrete and positive as those which describe Jesus' identity. In short, the question becomes, not simply *who* is present (Frei has established that); nor *on what basis* can we speak of his presence (Frei has

⁸¹ Frei, "Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 103.

⁸² Frei, *Identity*, 186.

established that also); but *in what manner* he can be said to be present now. And even at this point in Frei's logic of belief, this is no straightforward undertaking:

Although Christian believers assert [Jesus'] self-presence now as a literal fact, they do not know how to imagine or conceive it...; all they can say is that it must have a spatial and temporal basis without it being subject to these confinements in such a way as to be trammelled in its freedom.⁸³

The question Frei identifies concerns how we humans, limited by time and space to analogy, are to speak of his presence when Jesus is not available to the senses? For all that claims for Jesus' presence are predicated upon his most concrete narrative identity; and for all that his identity description as the Living One necessarily includes his presence; nevertheless, the indirect and elusive nature of Jesus' presence in our historical moment seems illegitimately discontinuous with his direct historical presence to his disciples. And if we mean something entirely different when we speak about the presence of Christ, compared to what we mean when we speak about the presence of a friend, then it may be that our grammar has betrayed us, and the nonbelievers are correct when they point out in bewilderment that there is *nothing there*.

It is at this point in his christological proposal that Frei brings in the Holy Spirit: a late and very brief consideration which could potentially lead to accusations of binitarianism. However, in the brevity of his treatment, Frei is at least in good company. In *Church Dogmatics IV*, Barth writes about the brevity of the credal formulations on the Holy Spirit, and the paucity of doctrines pertaining to the Spirit, as illustrations not simply of theological difficulty, but perhaps also of necessary silence:

Even the New Testament, although time and again it places the Holy Spirit between the event of Christ on the one hand and the Christian community and the Christian faith on the other, does not really tell us anything about the How, the mode of His working ... All that is said of it is an attestation and confirmation of the fact that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ ... Beyond the description and assertion of this fact there did not emerge any doctrine of the Holy Spirit and His work even in the secondary and later theology of the Church. All that could be done was to refer forward to this special work of God from Christology and the doctrine of justification (or sanctification or calling), and to refer backward to it from the doctrine of the Church and of faith (or love or hope).⁸⁴

⁸³ Frei, *Identity*, 187.

⁸⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, (London & New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 649.

In other words, beyond a simple Trinitarian affirmation, the church traditionally has had very little to say about the Spirit in ontological terms. Rather, it has been obliged to refer first and foremost to the *acts* of the Spirit: to what the Spirit actually does in the world and in the church. Frei's central and oft-repeated point is that we cannot separate God from God's works, for God constitutes God's own identity in and by God's works. In one respect then, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit may be the one which is most amenable to Frei's descriptive treatment. If we are looking for the concrete content of God the Holy Spirit, then we must look at the acts of the Spirit in time, including our time: God with us, as Barth puts it, "is not a state but an event".⁸⁵

Nevertheless, as has been established, the resurrection remains our logical starting point for any theological enterprise. For Barth, the ability to talk about "God with us" in *Church Dogmatics IV* is rooted firmly in the concrete history of Jesus Christ:

We must realise that the Christian message does not at its heart express a concept or an idea, nor does it recount an anonymous history to be taken as truth and reality only in concepts and ideas. This means that all the concepts and ideas used in this report (God, man, world, eternity, time, even salvation, grace, transgression, atonement and many others) can derive their significance only from the bearer of this name and from His history, and not the reverse ... They cannot say what has to be said with some meaning of their own or in some context of their own abstracted from this name. They can serve only to describe this name – the name of Jesus Christ.⁸⁶

In similar fashion, Frei grounds his talk of the Holy Spirit in the concrete gospel account of the identity of Jesus Christ – a hermeneutical realism, if you will, rather than a strictly historical one. Indeed, the very concreteness of that narrative identity sets the pattern for all our talk about God, including God the Spirit, so that anything less than concrete is less than real.

Therefore, when Frei states that "to speak of the identity of *Jesus*, in which he is affirmed by the believer to be present, is also to speak of the presence of *God*"⁸⁷, we read 'God' wrongly if we think of God in terms only of God the Father. In the first place, this would be to posit an illegitimate separation between the Father and the Son, who, it will be recalled, have been revealed in the resurrection as sharing one

⁸⁵ Barth, *CD IV/1*, 6.

⁸⁶ Barth, *CD IV/1*, 16–17.

⁸⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 186.

subject. Rather, it is important to realise that the “complex unity” of God and Jesus of Nazareth, in which “we can no longer think of God except as we think of Jesus at the same time, nor of Jesus except by reference to God”⁸⁸, is also a complex *grammatical* unity of an historically past event and the eternally present event of the presence of God now. This complex grammatical unity is made slightly simpler in the lexicon of the Christian believer by means of the term, the ‘Holy Spirit’.

Importantly, this is not to say that Frei has reduced the Spirit to a mere grammatical function. Rather, it is to say that the complex unity between God and Jesus Christ, as evidenced by the tangles of grammar and logic which Frei has so patiently unravelled, is a unity which is effected by the Holy Spirit. According to Barth, the Spirit is situated logically and grammatically as the one who affirms the unity of the other two ‘modes of being’ of God: “God’s self-attestation makes what He does the Word which is spoken to this man and received and accepted by him. The Holy Spirit is God in this His self-attestation.”⁸⁹ Or to put it another way, the Holy Spirit is the principle of the unity of *deus* and *dixit*, and so is revealed in that unity. In Frei’s similarly anti-speculative stance, there is likewise no gap between who God is and what God does, so that when God reveals to us in our present existential moment, the Spirit is the principle of the unity of that event of revelation with the revealing subject. If indeed, as we have found, we cannot insert a wedge between ontological subject and epistemological predicate, it is because they are held together by the Spirit.

The Spirit as the principle of unity can be extended yet further, to underlie the whole scheme of figuration outlined in Chapter 3. The Spirit can be identified with the ‘inspired’ gospel story, which narrates without strain the unity of divine and human in Jesus Christ. Likewise, the Spirit can be identified with the unity of divine and human in Jesus’ concrete personal self. As such, the Holy Spirit is also revealed to be, analogously, a ‘person’. And finally, when it comes to the issue of the presence of Jesus Christ, Frei’s gospel exegesis reveals the central role of the concept of the

⁸⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 187.

⁸⁹ Barth, *CD IV/1*, 646.

Holy Spirit. While Jesus was still directly present to his disciples, the Spirit was yet a shadowy concept, mysteriously unifying God with this man Jesus of Nazareth, most particularly at his conception and baptism. However, as the gospel narratives begin to move through Jesus' death and resurrection, and into the Book of Acts, so "this indirectness both of Christ's presence and of our grasp of it as a mysterious, self-focused presence is expressed in the stress ... on the fact that Jesus had to withdraw from men before the Spirit would be bestowed on the community of believers".⁹⁰ In other words, Frei is equating the two: the indirectness of Christ's presence to us *is* the concrete content of the Holy Spirit.

This is how the Christian is able to achieve the remarkable grammatical feat of asserting the self-focussed presence of Jesus Christ, which must necessarily have a "spatial and temporal" basis if it is to be continuous with his direct presence to his disciples, while yet insisting that that same body is not confined by space and time "in such a way as to be trammelled in its freedom". This is also what allows the Christian to access a grammar and doctrine of analogy in order to express the self-presence of Christ to us:

His presence has ... a spatial and temporal *basis*. He must be conceived of in analogy to the only manner in which we know presence: Presence means something like physical proximity and verbal communication; and it also involves self-presence, without which there cannot be presence to others. It is only insofar as he is self-focused that he can be present now.⁹¹

In contrast to the 'liberal' account of the impact of Jesus' personality or God-consciousness; and in contrast also to his dissipated presence in the existentialist scheme, which relies on *our* fragile reality in space and time to anchor his; Frei's doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the indirect presence of Christ locates his indirectness precisely *in* his presence. The ever-present subject-self of the triune God has given Godself to us in revelation. Yet once again, God's presence is *necessarily* indirect: for we remember first of all, that a person is always elusive; and remember secondly, that one cannot objectify presence until – instantaneously – it has become the past.

⁹⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 187.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

4.2 The Spirit in Our Time

We have established, then, that the narrative identity of Jesus Christ, as the one who cannot be thought of as not living, extends the gospel narratives into our present historical and existential moment. This unity of past and present is the work of the Holy Spirit, whose identity is the indirect presence of Christ to us. Anchored by the actuality of the gospel resurrection accounts, the acts of God *now* are likewise narratable. Such a narration is a fraught exercise: the experience of God in this present moment is precisely the starting point of the existentialists, and if the narration loses its hermeneutical anchor in the identity of Jesus Christ, then it once again quickly degenerates into “illusion or covert talk about the human self”.⁹² Nevertheless, it is appropriate to Frei’s account of the content of God to attempt to describe the continued action of God the Holy Spirit into in our present history. Although of course, one must always bear in mind the provisional nature of such description.

Frei starts by conceiving of the Holy Spirit in terms of the function the Spirit plays in the life of the believer. In the classical Calvinistic sense, he uses ‘Spirit’ to define the difference between faith and nonbelief. The nonbeliever, as we have seen, is at no disadvantage in reading scripture when it comes to the identity of Jesus Christ. Therefore, a nonbeliever can speak of the narratively-rendered cumulative identity of Jesus with perfect accuracy, even to the point of saying that *according to the narrative*, to think of Jesus as not present is not to think of him at all. However, unless the gift of faith is given, perhaps even in and with the reading of the narrative, the nonbeliever cannot make that leap from *Jesus as present according to the narrative*, to *Jesus as actually present now*. The narrative in itself has no power to make Jesus present to the reader, and nor does a right hermeneutic. Rather, true to Calvin’s insight, the words on the page remain “dead letters”⁹³ except as God gives them the capacity to speak now, by granting simultaneously the gift of the faith required for us to perceive their *present* referent. Otherwise, Jesus’ identity for the

⁹² Frei, *Identity*, 85.

⁹³ “The letter, therefore, is dead, and the law of the Lord slays its readers where it both is cut off from Christ’s grace ... and, leaving the heart untouched, sounds in the ears alone. But if through the Spirit it is really branded upon hearts, if it shows forth Christ, it is the word of life...” John Calvin, *Institutes* I.x, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 138.

nonbeliever remains merely historical and/or ‘storied’ – and for the nonbeliever, that story has come to an end.

For the believer, on the other hand, there can be no such ‘detached’ reading of the gospels. This holds whether they are gifted with faith as they read the story for the first time, or whether this is the oft-repeated reading of a faithful Christian. Rather, these tyrannical texts demand that a faithful reading is a ‘self-involving’ reading (an existentialist term), that is, a reading which responds to the narrative’s “factual affirmation” of the presence of Christ now with “commitment and love”.⁹⁴ As Frei points out, while other facts may require the reader’s assent, the narrative’s factual affirmation of the presence of God in Jesus Christ requires something more: it requires the reader’s whole-hearted self-involvement. For all that judgement as to the truth of Frei’s hypothesis must be suspended prior to exegesis, once that exegesis has been carried out, neutrality is no longer an option: only absolute acceptance or absolute rejection will do.

Here we may have found a point of connection between Frei’s realistic narrative hermeneutic, and the existentialist emphasis on ‘decision’:

[Trust and love] are moral and attitudinal perspectives appropriate for other than merely factual occasions. They are reserved for the affective life and personal relations. But in this unique instance the distinction will not work. For the believer to know who Jesus Christ is, to affirm his presence, and to adore him are one and the same thing. Just as Christ’s presence and identity cannot be conceived apart, factual affirmation of him and commitment to him cannot be conceived apart either. Reference to the Spirit is the affirmation that the unique unity of Jesus Christ’s identity and presence calls forth a similarly unique response.⁹⁵

This gift of faith that demands the self-involvement of the reader in the gospel narratives is where Frei locates the action of the Holy Spirit in the present. At this point Frei can at last use the word ‘fact’ in a sense which owes nothing to Enlightenment rationality, and everything to the faith-encounter. Faith, which is gifted by the Holy Spirit, must affirm the identity of Jesus Christ the Crucified and Risen Saviour as a ‘fact’ above and beyond the empirical facts of this world. This is the same sense in which the ‘history-like’ narratives of the gospels are not ‘sub-

⁹⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 187.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 188.

history' but 'supra-history', absorbing and transcending the "brute facts"⁹⁶ of the dialectically estranged world, so that the affirmation of the fact of the resurrection becomes an acknowledgement of the absolute reality of God's revelation as perceived in faith. The life of faith cannot abstract the existentially present encounter with God from the details of these 'history-like' narratives, but must root the indirect presence of Jesus Christ, which is the Holy Spirit, most firmly in his factual gospel identity.

5. Eschatology and Identity

5.1 The Presence of God to the Church

It is therefore entirely consistent with Frei's logic of belief to describe the content of God in terms of the action of the Holy Spirit in our present history. However, as has been established, the presence of God, which is the identity of Jesus Christ, is always "elusive", so that every attempt at description must be provisional. This provisionality is located first of all in the elusiveness of the person, and secondly, in the unobjectifiable nature of the present moment. But this provisionality also has a further basis, and that basis is the eschatological nature of the church.

The work of God the Holy Spirit is most objectively available to us in the work of the church. If Jesus' presence has "a spatial and temporal basis", and if presence "means something like physical proximity and verbal communication", then the spatial and temporal nature of the church, as constituted by the physical proximity of sacrament and the verbal communication of word, is given to us as a fitting analogy of Christ's direct presence to his disciples. Frei regards the church as having a two-fold office: first of all, that of witnessing to the presence of Christ; and secondly, that of being the communal *form* of Christ's indirect presence.⁹⁷ Remembering that the medium is not the thing, this means that neither the church, nor the word and

⁹⁶ "Now that God has made himself known within the world in Jesus Christ, ignorance of God has been fundamentally outdated. It has become a brute fact devoid of meaning or basis." Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), 125.

⁹⁷ See Frei, *Identity*, 188.

sacrament which constitute it, can be identified directly with the presence of Jesus Christ. What Frei says below about sacrament is applicable to word also:

The Sacrament is not identical with his physical presence – for he is not physically present now – but it is the self-communication in physical form of one who is self-focused to us who cannot know self-focused presence except in physical form.⁹⁸

Nevertheless, while the church is not Christ, yet “the form is founded in the content”: as the communal *form* of the presence of God in Christ, the church is founded in the *content* of the church’s message, which is the identity of Jesus Christ as narrated in the gospels. And of course, in this “one unique case identity and presence are so completely one that to know who he is is to confront his presence”.⁹⁹ This means that even as the church witnesses to the identity of Jesus as the content of its proclamation, Jesus is already present as the content of the church, witnessing in turn to the identity of the church as the fit analogy and medium of “that which it is not”.¹⁰⁰ The unity of Father and Son in the resurrection, which is the Holy Spirit, makes possible the unity of the church’s “factual affirmation” of the identity and presence of Jesus Christ with the communal response of the believer of “faith, hope, and love”.¹⁰¹

This theological actualism, combined with Frei’s very definite hermeneutical realism, has dramatic implications for the language of the church’s proclamation. Bultmann, of course, was deeply concerned about preaching, much more so than Frei, but was faced always with the task of ‘translating’ the mythical accounts of the gospels into contemporary language and myth. This task brought with it an ever-present worry about anthropomorphism, for the vagueness and uncertainty of what Hunsinger categorises as “expressivism”¹⁰², means that every statement, every metaphor used in preaching, must be accompanied by the caveat that we cannot truly describe God. But where for expressivism, “the divine referent was essentially *other*

⁹⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 194.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 117. Compare Barth’s comment in *CD IV/1*, 17: “Where between man and man there is real communication of the report of what took place in Him and through Him, He Himself is there and at work, He Himself makes Himself to be recognised and acknowledged.”

¹⁰⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 194.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 189.

¹⁰² See the chapter, “Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth’s Hermeneutical Realism (1987)”, in George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 210–25.

than metaphorically depicted”, for Barth, it is “essentially *similar*”.¹⁰³ In other words, and from Frei’s point of view also, in Jesus Christ scripture has provided us with the metaphors, concepts, and analogies we need to describe God with relative confidence. For Barth, this is because the scriptural anthropomorphic metaphors really do correspond by analogy to God, by means of divine grace – correspondence of “*Die unbegreiflichen Ähnlichkeit*”¹⁰⁴, which Hunsinger renders as “incomprehensible similarity”.¹⁰⁵ The metaphors work because they originate with God, who defines what it means to be a ‘person’, and bestows the definition upon us. Hence God is not the comparative: rather, it is *our* reality which is the weaker referent. God governs God’s own predicates.

To Barth’s account Frei adds the assurance, that Jesus made these metaphors his own precisely in the event of the resurrection, when God’s freedom to self-define is likewise given fully to him. So, in contrast to Bultmann, preaching for Frei can proceed without worrying about anthropomorphism, for God’s revelation as the *person* of Jesus Christ has in effect sanctioned the human analogy, as long as ‘human’ is defined by God, and not the other way around. Furthermore, in Frei’s scheme, the use of such scripturally-founded analogies are further guaranteed to ‘really refer’, in that not only do the scripture narratives fitly describe Jesus’ resurrected identity, but they also constitute it, and in doing so, confess him as actually present.

5.2 The Presence of God to History

In a cautious “certain parallel”, Frei finds that he can also describe the Holy Spirit as the principle of unity between the ‘fact’ of the indirect presence of Christ to the church, and Christ’s presence “in and to the shape of public events of the world and of human history”.¹⁰⁶ In a fascinating statement, Frei declares how “Humanity at large is the neighbour given to the church, through whom Christ is present to the

¹⁰³ Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 217. (my italics)

¹⁰⁴ Barth, *CD III/1*, 226.

¹⁰⁵ Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 219.

¹⁰⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 192.

church”.¹⁰⁷ This confirms first of all the “elusiveness” of Christ’s presence, so that the church can never claim that his presence is exclusive to its administration of word and sacrament. But more importantly here, Frei is also able to claim that Jesus is present to the church through “humanity at large” on the basis of God’s providential involvement in the linear process of history, as established at creation and sealed by the resurrection. Thus, even while the church witnesses to Christ’s presence to the world, so too the world witnesses to Christ’s presence to the church, as events in history point in an analogous, parabolic sense to the grace and providence of God. Indeed, as the preacher knows, images and parables derived from the history of the world at large may speak of the presence of Christ with far greater power than events simply in church history. This is not to say that these world events constitute the identity of Jesus Christ in the same concrete way as do the gospel narratives. Nevertheless, Jesus’ own use of parable and analogy, coupled with God’s gracious revelation in the medium of the chronologically linear historical narrative, mandates the analogical predication of world events to the presence of Christ. Indeed, the unsubstitutability, particularly of the event of the resurrection, acts to guarantee the analogous unsubstitutability of all historical events and persons. This establishment of their uniqueness then frees them to point beyond their contemporariness, and to witness in figurative fashion to the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. Thus Frei can state that, where the death of Jesus of Nazareth “has its own final and ineradicable “thereness,” after the fashion of all historical events”, so “the same is true of all terrible sacrifices dimly setting forth the same pattern”.¹⁰⁸ This is a clear counter to Kay’s contention, that Frei’s account of the identity of Jesus Christ fails to do “full justice to the claim of the New Testament that Jesus Christ continues to address hearers today through the preaching of his heralds”.¹⁰⁹ Through the resurrection, the figurative narrative of the Bible does indeed extend into our time and beyond.

Once again, this does not mean that historical events or persons have any power in themselves to be or to produce Christ’s presence to us. Perhaps surprisingly, Frei

¹⁰⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 192.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Kay, “Review: *Preaching Jesus*”, 404.

states that not even the passion and resurrection can “light up all history”, for “it is, in the first place, not a parable at all, but an event climactically summing up a long series of events”.¹¹⁰ In other words, before the resurrection can illumine our present, it is first and foremost an event in its own time, contingent and historical, the narrative climax of a whole series of contingent events and the summation of history up until that point. This returns us to Frei’s point about figuration – and it seems accurate to read his use of “parable” here as a kind of synonym for ‘figure’. Just as the Old Testament events and prophecies must be read first of all according to their own immediate referent; and just as their freedom in and for themselves must be confirmed before they can be ‘extended’ to refer prophetically to the event and person of Jesus Christ; so the events of the Passion must be read according to their own historical situatedness before they are ‘pressed forward’ into our time and beyond. An event can only point to the future when it has first of all been itself, and then secondly, has been understood as fulfilling the past. Or to put it another way, in the grammatical logic of belief, concrete reality as the subject must come *first*, and only then can figuration or parable be predicated.¹¹¹ Hence Jesus Christ in his resurrection is first of all present to himself, and only on that basis can he then be present to us.

The identity of the church is therefore constituted by this dual presence of Christ, first of all to word and sacrament, and then to the world. Once again, this duality of identity is given its unity through the Holy Spirit, precisely in the continued narration of Christ’s acts in history as grounded in the resurrection.¹¹² The Holy Spirit’s role here is vital, for the connection between Christ’s presence in word and sacrament on the one hand, and his activity in the world on the other, is not actually that obvious. Frei considers how a kind of doubt in the factuality of Christ’s narrative identity can lead to a disassociation of his presence from the church, and the concurrent re-

¹¹⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 193.

¹¹¹ Barth makes a similar point but with a different image: that the ‘circumference’ of creation and eschatology can be seen only from the central point, which is the atonement. See *CD IV/I*, 3. Frei’s linear scheme seems closer to the chronological pattern of time, where historical event succeeds event; Barth’s circular image perhaps gives more attention to the concept of time as it is included within God’s eternity.

¹¹² Frei, *Identity*, 189.

association of his presence with the “causes of the disinherited”¹¹³ in the world – another reference, perhaps, to the existentialist portrayal of Jesus as the archetype of human alienation. On the other hand, a church which over-emphasises biblicism and/or sacramentalism is likely to find it hard to discern the presence of Christ to the world. Church and world do not necessarily hang easily together, but depend upon the Spirit to unify Christ’s presence to both:

It is only by reference to the Spirit, i.e., to the complete unity of Jesus Christ’s identity and presence given to us now indirectly, that Word and Sacrament cohere with passionate Christian concern for the world and its mysterious passage from event to event ... The church is founded on and sets forth the unity of both only through the presence of Jesus Christ.¹¹⁴

Hence it is entirely appropriate to think analogically of the church as the Body of Christ, given that the church’s identity, after Jesus’ own, is established through its intended actions and unintended passions in the public sphere. Not that the church is the Body of Christ in anything other than an analogous sense: as Frei wrote, “The church must be a follower rather than a complete reiteration of its Lord”.¹¹⁵ However, patterned after Jesus Christ, who is the content of its proclamation, the church has a similarly “elusive, persistent, and continuous”¹¹⁶ subject. Indeed, through the Holy Spirit, the intended-actions of this analogous body of Christ are united with and included in the narrative that continues to identify Jesus Christ, whose self-manifestation is continuous then with now. Therefore, the church can narrate its own identity after the same pattern, as continuous with the identity and presence of Jesus Christ, and by grace it is therefore established as a fit ‘form’ for the on-going revelation of the content of God.

This identity of Jesus with his ‘body’, the church, is provisional also in an eschatological sense, and this precisely because the church is so historically situated. Once again, this eschatological focus is founded on the resurrection. Where Jesus’ identity was still ambiguous until the resurrection, so too the ambiguous history of the church will some day culminate in a climactic revelatory event. Moreover, because the church relates ‘forward’ to the second coming in a way analogous to

¹¹³ Frei, *Identity*, 189.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 190–1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 190.

how Israel related 'forward' to the incarnation, so it is Jesus who will fulfil the church's identity, just as he fulfilled the Law. In a real sense, the story of the church is unfinished, and will finish only when, according to the pattern established by Jesus Christ in the resurrection, all of history climaxes in a new eschatological revelation of his identity:

The relation between the church and Jesus Christ is somewhat like that between Israel and Jesus. To describe the people of Israel is to narrate its history. And to identify that people ... with the identity of Jesus Christ is to narrate the history of Jesus ... in such a way that it is seen as the individual and climactic summing up, incorporation, and identification of the whole people, by which the people receive their identification. The church likewise moves towards an as yet undisclosed historical summing up that must be narrated, though it cannot yet be because the story is unfinished...¹¹⁷

This parallel between the church and Israel suggests that history itself must be read through a 'realistic narrative hermeneutic' similar to that with which we have read the gospels. Given that we have no more neutral a perspective on history than we have on scripture, this suggests likewise that our reading of history demands a commixture of a minimal interpretative scheme with Christian commitment and love.

A further implication is that the identity of Jesus Christ cannot be rendered finally, not even through the gospel narratives, because after an eschatological mode of thinking, it is still incomplete. This is not to say that the gospel accounts are deficient in any way, or that the storied identity which has been revealed to us is in any way not full. Rather, it is the simple recognition that a living person has a history still to come. Only those who are dead can have the story of their identity squared off and closed: only those who are dead can be objectified as an event which is in the past. By contrast, the elusive living *presence* of Jesus Christ remains open to the further development of his identity. This is because, in the linear logic of time, "the past cannot be an absolute clue to the future, if the future is a genuinely open one".¹¹⁸ Frei is not saying that the future is unknown to Christ, or that his identity is somehow incomplete to himself. Rather, he is saying that we humans will not know Jesus' full historical identity until we can look back from the end of time and describe it thence. And even then, we have the eternal perspective to deal with, in which there will be every new discoveries of the fullness of God. Therefore, an

¹¹⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 190.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 193.

account of the identity of Jesus Christ “involves an inevitable appeal to the undisclosed future and, hence, to the mysterious, distinctive future mode of that presence”.¹¹⁹ This is an admission of the persistence, elusiveness, and ultimacy of the identity of Jesus Christ: quite how he will appear and be known by us when he becomes the “significant, incorporative summing up of history” - well, as Frei points out, we would be “fools to try to imagine or forecast [that] in literal fashion”.¹²⁰

6. Conclusion

Once again, although grammatically we must separate identity and presence in order to think about them, we have seen how they are not to be separated in actuality. The presence of Jesus Christ is so intrinsic to his identity, that to conceive of him as not present, or as dead, “is the equivalent of not thinking of him at all.”¹²¹ Once again, while grammatical logic must say one thing prior to another, the actuality in terms of identity, and perhaps even of ontology, is one of unity and simultaneity.

Moreover, Frei has established that this principle of unity, or non-separation of subject and predicate in the “unique case”¹²² of Jesus Christ, is to be understood as the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit has perhaps emerged a little late in Frei’s ‘system’, but in terms of the logic of belief, this is because this doctrine, like all others, is founded on the full revelation of the co-identity of Jesus and God in the resurrection. In other words, the Holy Spirit as the presence of God could not be predicated prior to the establishment of the identity of Jesus Christ. However, now that the doctrine of the Spirit has been established, it is seen to be key to the whole principle of unity and simultaneity which pervades Frei’s theology: the unity of the biblical canon; the simultaneity of the two natures in one person; the unity of all disparate intended actions in one ascriptive subject; the unity of all historical events in one cumulative story; the simultaneity of subject and predicate, of being and

¹¹⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 191.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 180. See also Frei, “Theological Reflections”, 43.

¹²² *Ibid.* 117.

action, of *deus* and *dixit*; the unity of Jesus' identity and presence; and the unity of the Father and the Son. No doubt there are more.

Nevertheless, even this principle of unity and simultaneity in the Holy Spirit can be maintained only by exegetical reference back to the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Barth puts it:

Our formulation is again and again that the Christian message (in all its content) means Jesus Christ. In the declaration and development of its whole content it always has reference to Him. His name, therefore, is not incidental to it ... He Himself is the whole.¹²³

Hence Frei's insistence not only on the persistence and elusiveness of the identity of Jesus Christ, but also upon its *ultimacy*. No other event but the crucifixion-resurrection could form the central point from which we can view the line of history from creation to eschaton. No other story but the story of Jesus Christ, past, present, and future, can unite the disparate events of public history with the eternal dialectical moments of God's revelation, rescuing them from chaos and providing them in his own person with a providential order. No other person but Christ could hold together, in unity and without strain, a fully divine and a fully human nature. Nothing can be said about God, or indeed analogically about humanity, apart from the concrete content of both that is embodied by this particular man, Jesus of Nazareth. Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic has proved itself adequate to the task of demonstrating the truth of his hypothesis. And so, the resurrection has been established as the starting point for our logic of belief, and the basis of every tentative theological attempt to say something concrete about the content of God.

¹²³ Barth, *CD IV/1*, 57n20.

Conclusion

1. Grammar

This thesis has been concerned to trace Frei's search for a way of speaking about God in which God is no metaphysical abstraction, but has a describable concrete content. In this anti-metaphysical commitment, Frei has been located most firmly in his mid-20th century context, this being a hallmark also of the dialectical "theology of crisis" which developed in the wake of Karl Barth's second edition of *Der Römerbrief*. Indeed, this rejection of speculative metaphysics marks one of the few locations of continuity between the *krisis* theologians and their 19th century liberal forebears, who were likewise concerned to formulate a concept of God which had some concrete reality. Accordingly, this thesis has taken pains to define some of the many theological schools and movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, and to trace some of the complex connections between them. Frei understood these connections better than most, and chose his own theological standpoint with remarkable clear-sightedness, positioning himself cautiously and provisionally alongside whatever seemed to him the most coherent at the time, but refusing to commit himself absolutely to any one theological 'school' or 'system'.

Continuity between the liberal and the *krisis* theologians can also be located in their central valuation of the doctrine of revelation for the theological task. Of course, their treatment of the doctrine is so very different that in 1940, Niebuhr felt obliged to speak about its "*reappearance* in contemporary theological discussion"¹: perhaps the concept of 'immanent' revelation had blurred Schleiermacher's insistence that revelation nevertheless comes from 'without'. Be that as it may, it was demonstrated in Chapter 1 of this thesis that Barth, Niebuhr, and Schleiermacher all take the starting point of their theological projects to be a doctrine of revelation.

¹ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 1. (my italics)

However, it was Frei's insight, that simply beginning with 'revelation' posited in and of itself, ultimately does not lead to any concrete content that we can predicate of God. Indeed, our examination of the doctrine demonstrated how each of the three theologians struggles in his own way to avoid the same metaphysical abstractions that he is reacting against. Indeed, Frei's opinion was that not even Barth's strong actualism had managed to sidestep speculation altogether. And in failing to do so, Frei judged that Barth had effectively opened the door to Frei's theological bugbear: existentialist theology of the Neo-Orthodox variety.

Frei's examination of the doctrine of revelation, in his doctoral thesis and in his contribution to *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, crystallised into an insistence, that any account of God must have a concrete content. But before he could work out for himself exactly how to frame his own account, he was obliged to deduce how it was that three supposedly 'concrete' accounts of revelation had yet given rise to at least two abstract accounts of God (Barth's being a special case). By the time he came to write his preface to *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei had concluded that the problem was a grammatical one: that while their insights might be perfectly valid, they had said the wrong thing first, and so had started their 'systems' in the wrong place. To compound matters, in the case of Schleiermacher and Niebuhr at least, they had mistaken this issue of the *logical* starting point with the subject of theology itself. This meant that the problem went deeper even than questions of right and wrong order: for even should the logic of belief be 'correct', this did not mean that the grammar could be equated without residue with an ontological reality.

Accordingly, Frei's logic of belief makes three key points. The first, as described above, is that grammar must not be confused with an ontological reality: the medium is not the thing. The second is that grammar must nevertheless be fitting to that ontological reality: "the form is founded in the content". And the third is that the grammar works in one direction only, from subject to predicate, and is irreversible.

This first issue in this logic of belief has been central to the argument of this thesis: that Frei was deeply concerned to "untangle" the theological confusions which result whenever grammatical logic is equated too directly with ontology and epistemology.

For dialectical theologians of whatever variety, these logical “tangles” begin with the priority given to the doctrine of revelation: with the claim that God has in some sense revealed in a concrete, this-worldly form. Frei perceived that the vital difficulty with this claim is that the doctrine of revelation *seems* to offer epistemological access to the content of God, but in the event turns out to have no content whatsoever. For doctrine is always and essentially *grammar*, concerned above all with the right ordering of theological statements. Accordingly, in the dialectical logic of belief, revelation must be posited as the first of all doctrines, for from a purely logical point of view, we cannot even begin to talk about the Wholly Other God until that God has revealed to us. Thus a doctrine of revelation is the necessary grammatical starting point for theology.

That, on some level, the dialectical theologians knew about the contentless nature of revelation, is evident in Schleiermacher’s focus on the consciousness of God (rather than on God *an sich*), and also in the existentialist awareness of the absence of God. In that sense, they were absolutely right: the content of God is not given to us in the moment of revelation as such. Rather, revelation should be understood as the *logical precondition* for the giving of the content of God. However, what these theologians did not realise, is that the subsequent lack of content to God in their accounts was owing to the fact that they were treating the ‘medium’ as the ‘thing’. In other words, they were treating this logical starting point for theology as if it were the whole of theology – the whole content of God – in itself. The irony for the *krisis* theologians in particular, is that while they insisted that the *event* of revelation had no extension in time or space, they somehow did not recognise the *doctrine* of revelation for the single, non-extended, grammatical point that it is.

In contrast to such logical tangles, and in contrast too to the abstractions of the hermeneutical circle, Frei advocates a much simpler model of both hermeneutics and theology: that of the ‘hermeneutical straight line’. This is a key concept to the understanding of Frei. The significance of the linear model is that – in contrast to a circle – a line must have a starting point. The identification of that starting point is therefore the first task of theology. From that basis, the logic of belief then proceeds, as one doctrine is unfolded after another, always seeking for the correct logical order in which to say things. The effect is therefore *cumulative* rather than circular: we do

not understand the whole of the content of God in terms of the part, or the parts in terms of the whole, but rather, each detail unfolds out of the one before, so that we have before us an increasingly full description of the content of God.

This cumulative and linear model for theology comes under our second point about theological grammar: that it must be fitting to the ontological reality which it seeks to describe. The linear “form” has itself been established as appropriate precisely in the “content” of God, revealed in time as the storied person, Jesus Christ. Therefore, the fittingness of a linear and cumulative logic of belief is “founded” in the chronologically linear progress of revelatory history. In the same way, it is also founded in the linear structure of the biblical story; and in the storied identity from birth to death to resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

The third and last point about theological grammar is that in this linear model, it works in one direction only. Once again, the principle here is to guard against metaphysical abstraction. In the grammatical formulation, the subject comes before the predicate and “governs” the predicate: the predicate has no free-standing reality of its own, but has meaning only as meaning is granted to it by the subject. In the case of God, this means that no predicate can be taken as defining of God’s essence: rather, it is God who defines the essence of the predicate. The reality is all God’s, who then bestows that reality on everything else. This is yet another reason why a doctrine of revelation, taken in and of itself, has no content: for it is God who gives the content to revelation, and not the other way round.

This grammatical ordering of subject and predicate also applies in Frei’s scheme to intention and action, and to self and manifestation. There is a logical order in which an intending subject-self must necessarily be posited as prior to the active predicate in which the self is manifested. Yet, to return to our first principle, the grammatical formulation must not be loaded with too much ontological significance in itself. Just because we must necessarily and fittingly speak of subject before predicate, of intention before action, of self before manifestation, this does not mean that we must conceptualise the subject, intention, and self as ontologically separate from their predicate, action, and manifestation. A ‘being’, posited apart from its action and

self-manifestation in the world, is an abstraction, existing on a conceptual plane only, and having no reality in this world.

In the same way, when it comes to the presence and the identity of Jesus Christ, Frei observes:

Talk about Christ's identity and presence should be in that order, rather than the reverse, even though identity and presence are one in him as he relates himself to us.²

His exegesis of the gospel accounts of the resurrection, and his subsequent (though also 'previous') contention, that "knowing his identity is identical with having him present or being in his presence", means that grammatically speaking, Jesus' identity is the subject to which his presence is the predicate. Yet in actuality, his presence is so contained in his identity that it becomes a logical nonsense to separate them – which is the very point of Frei's 'Anselmic' formulation. Accordingly, Frei refuses the actual separation of subject and predicate, but insists that for all their necessary and fitting grammatical ordering, they must nevertheless be held in absolute simultaneity. This insight is very much at the heart of his criticism, both of Schleiermacherian liberalism and of existentialist theology: that they have inserted a wedge between God and God's revelation, so that it was impossible for God to give content to revelation. Then, to compound the error, they had focused their attention on the predicate, in the hope that they could then reverse the grammatical logic and work "upstream" to the subject. It is little wonder that the subject simply disappeared on them.

By contrast, whatever the weaknesses in Barth's starting point, his strong actualism always held together the being and the action of God, so that positing God without revelation would be as meaningless as positing revelation without God. In Frei's very specifically resurrection-centric terms, this meant that God, and God's revelation, Jesus, have to be held together in such simultaneity, that it is better to speak of them as one subject, rather than as subject and predicate. Thus, for Frei as for Barth, the categories of ontology and epistemology become almost redundant, so merged are they into one. Hence the suggestion at the end of Chapter 3, that "identity" is a much more useful category than 'ontology' and 'epistemology'.

² Frei, *Identity*, 68.

2. Dialogue

These complex details of Frei's logic of belief were not worked out in isolation. At each step of this exploration of his theological grammar, Frei has been placed in dialogue, firstly with his main theological influences, as discussed above; then with his contemporary opposition; and finally with his modern-day allies and critics.

In the first case, Frei must absolutely be understood as a Barthian theologian. At a time when Barth's early dialectical theology had been pulled out of all shape by existentialist theology, Frei must have cut a solitary figure in the English-speaking theological world, given his rather unfashionable insistence on Barth's objective realism. Moreover, where Barth's later theology was still largely being ignored, Frei was thoroughly familiar with it, in particular with Barth's later development of a doctrine of analogy, (even if it is correct that Frei misinterpreted it in one of its aspects). Thus his reputation as one of the foremost interpreters of Barth's theology still stands, although it has been slightly tarnished in recent years by McCormack's critique. Of particular note is Frei's analysis, from his doctoral thesis through to his last work in *Types of Christian Theology*, of Barth's theological method. Indeed, if Frei has had any influence on the 'postliberal' movement, it is in his championing of the notion of 'ad hoc-ness' in scriptural interpretation, and his insistence on the internal logic of Christian doctrinal statements. That he may have been misappropriated, by Lindbeck in particular, should not have a bearing on an objective assessment of his interpretation of Barth.

However, of more relevance here than the accuracy or otherwise of his reading of Barth, is Frei's appropriation of Barthian principles for his own theological projects. If he is to be called a Barthian *theologian*, and not just an interpreter, it is because he used Barthian principles in his theology, extended Barth's thinking with his own, and worked to counter the abstraction of Barth's starting point. As this thesis has demonstrated, the whole point of Frei's hermeneutical project was to find a way of foregrounding the story of Jesus Christ in order to test his "basic conviction", that the way to talk concretely about the content of God, was to talk concretely about the storied identity of Jesus Christ. While Barth had of course derived his *deus dixit*

prolegomena precisely from his exegetical reading of the historical Jesus-event, he did not turn to the concrete content of that person and event until later in his *Church Dogmatics*. Frei's corrective to Barth was to insist that the content of God, as given in the resurrection, must be the concrete starting point in the logic of belief.

Through a close reading of his theological output, this thesis has sought to demonstrate how even such a determinedly *ad hoc* theologian as Frei, who resisted theological system with all the might of his 20th century dialectical context, nevertheless proceeds according to a theological logic which is coherent at every stage. Frei is arguably most famous for the development of his biblical "realistic narrative" hermeneutic. The key features of this '*ad hoc*' hermeneutical method have been highlighted in Chapter 3 of this thesis, through a comparison with the 'universal' method espoused by Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher, of course, represented the liberal 'enemy' to early *krisis* theology, so that despite some appreciation of his aims and methods in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei nevertheless joins in the general condemnation. Be that as it may, the perceived failure of Schleiermacher's general hermeneutic of understanding when it came to the gospel narratives was vital to the formation of Frei's preferred approach.

It has been shown how Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic does not stand in isolation, but is part of a theological approach which conceptualises the figurative unity of the scripture alongside the similarly figurative unity of the person, and indeed, of the entire scope of providential history. As expounded in *Eclipse*, the realistic narrative hermeneutic simply refuses to treat the story of Jesus as dispensable. This turns out to be vital far beyond even the strict literal confines of scripture, for not only does the Bible tell a story, but in a parallel fashion, the whole of providential history is a linear, cumulative story – as too is the life-story of every single individual who has lived in that history. Thus Frei maintains the indispensability and "unsubstitutability" of every one of these interconnected narratives. There is a profound ethical valuing of 'world' in Frei's theology.³

³ Mike Higton has explored this ethical and public dimension to Frei's theology at length in *Christ, Providence, and History*.

In this way, we have sought to demonstrate by comparison the richness and complexity of Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic, despite the apparent simplicity of his concept of the "literal sense". The whole point of a story, and of the concept of a storied person, is that they can hold together without strain the most logically contradictory predicates. Thus Frei neatly sidesteps the demand that theology be explanatory, and contends instead that its role is to be descriptive. This is not reductionism, but is in fact its opposite: the many layers and levels of a realistic narrative, and the complex web of interactions which it describes, leave meaning open in a way that 'translation' cannot. In the same way, particularly in the dialogue with William Placher in Chapter 4, we have illustrated the richness and complexity of every "ultimate" and "unsubstitutable" storied individual, none of whom are ever to be reduced to mere adjectival labels.

But of course, the unity of scripture, of the person, and of history, are all alike predicated on the identity of Jesus Christ in the resurrection. This has been central to the argument of this thesis, that the resurrection forms the logical *and* the actual starting point for all subsequent attempts to speak about God. It is the logical starting point, for in itself it is the doctrine of revelation: we have no other permission to talk about God apart from this event, which alone underpins the analogical fitness of our language. And it is the actual starting point, because it is so much more than a mere grammatical "frontier" for our talk: it is in fact the moment where the content of God is revealed as the presence of Jesus Christ. Therefore, as Frei himself writes, although the grammatical exercise, "in one sense, [is] merely technical; in another it may make a crucial difference in the interpretation of the gospel".⁴

On this very point of order, it is conceded that it has been necessary to explain Frei's conception of figurative unity, *before* proceeding to the centrality of the resurrection. Frei himself admits a similar difficulty with the ordering of his own project.

⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 67.

However, and once again, this grammatical ordering should not be confused with actuality:

I want to warn the reader that my procedure may appear to be the reverse of the program just set forth. In fact, I shall first examine the notions of presence and of the presence of Jesus Christ, trying to indicate in the process that reflection about Christ's presence leads us neither to that presence nor to an understanding of his identity.⁵

Our point is the same as his, that sometimes a 'clearing of the decks' of 'mistaken' assumptions must be done before the positive theology can proceed. Nevertheless, the resurrection forms the logical and actual starting point for conceptualising this figurative unity of scripture, person, and history. This is because it is only as the identity of Jesus is fully revealed that he can hold together in his unique story and person all other stories and persons. Thus in the resurrection he bestows the unity of his identity upon scripture, upon history, and upon each individual person, so that each lives, and moves, and has their being in him. This is why, as N.T. Wright points out, the resurrection for Frei is the point from which all other realities are viewed, but upon which itself there can be no perspective. For Frei does not have a system. Unlike Barth, he does not even have a dogmatics. Rather, Frei has a story. Frei has a person. Frei has Jesus.

This is how Frei attempted to underpin the Barthian prolegomena of the revelation-event with a concrete account of the identity of Jesus Christ. Therefore, for all that his engagement with Barth was often critical, Frei's intent was always to champion Barth's strong actualism as the way forward for theology. In particular, if he could fill in the gaps left by Barth, or illustrate where Barth had been misinterpreted, then that might be the best way for him to counter existentialist or Neo-Orthodox theology – by attacking it right at its supposedly Barthian roots.

The juxtaposition in this thesis of Frei with his contemporary opposition, particularly in the shape of Tillich and Bultmann, has not been helped by the lack of direct attention Frei has given them in print (although his lecture notes reveal a continuous engagement). Moreover, it took many years for the early Frei to work out his stance on Christian existentialism; while the later Frei was generous rather than

⁵ Frei, *Identity*, 68.

condemnatory in his assessment of others. Nevertheless, there are enough direct references, and even more allusions, to identify at what points he is most opposed to existentialist theology. As it has turned out, our detailed consideration of Tillich on the resurrection, and of Bultmann on presence, has usefully thrown into relief Frei's own position on these matters. Indeed, it is a conclusion of this thesis, that it is difficult to understand the aims and objectives of Frei's theology and methodology apart from this mid-20th century existentialist context. That is not to say that the significance of Frei must be confined to his own time. On the contrary, as the 21st century establishes itself, we badly need the clarity of Frei's perspective on our own theological inheritance.

Accordingly, in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this thesis, consideration was given to the continuing relevance and appropriation of Frei to modern theological controversies. The first of these current theological issues is the very abstruse debate about the relation between the *logos asarkos* and the *logos ensarkos*. Without commenting on the accuracy of anyone's interpretation of Barth, the suggestion was made here that Frei's insights into the relation between grammar and ontology might have something important to contribute, to the clarity of the debate if nothing else. It was also suggested that Frei's position might have been closer to that of Bruce McCormack's, although he would have been suitably wary of McCormack's 'reversal' of the theological grammar, and the resulting tendency to abstraction.

Frei's realistic narrative hermeneutic has been applied much more directly to another of these current issues, which is concerned with the relation (or non-relation) between historical biblical studies and the theological significance of Jesus Christ. Frei is regarded as something of a father-figure in this particular debate, but can sometimes be invoked carelessly: interestingly, he has been better understood by his 'opposition', in the figure of the historical biblical theologian N. T. Wright, than he has been by his 'supporters'. A more careful invocation of his methodologies would demonstrate that Frei's avoidance of the issue of historical referent remains vital, if the debate is not to become hopelessly speculative. This emphasis, however, needs to be balanced with an indignant denial that Frei has effectively replaced the historically past and present referent with a literary depiction. And finally, Frei's realistic narrative identity description needs to be revisited and re-understood, if the

neo-existentialist Tillichian option of “reception history” is not to be allowed to divorce Jesus once more from his predicates.

At the end, in Chapter 5, the focus was on the continued relevance of Frei’s theological grammar for the church and the world. Where James Kay was disappointed in the lack of practical explanation of Jesus’ presence, nevertheless the co-positing of that presence with the identity of Jesus Christ does achieve at least three practical outcomes. Firstly, it releases churches from the anxiety of having to explain the mode of his presence now, permitting them simply to describe it by the traditional doctrine of the Holy Spirit. (Sometimes, the shelving of explanatory systems in favour of doctrinal affirmation comes as a blessed relief.) Secondly, Frei’s theological grammar grounds the church’s affirmation of the presence of Christ – otherwise such a nebulous concept – in the concrete events of the resurrection: ‘He who cannot be conceived of as not living’ may be a minimal description, but it is a vital and a reassuring one. And thirdly, Frei’s realistic narrative hermeneutic reaffirms the centrality of scripture to the very existence of the church, giving permission once again to read it simply and literally, while not confusing the medium with the thing in itself. In the face of biblical inerrancy on the one hand, and the abstractions of myth and symbol on the other, Frei is in effect handing the interpretation of scripture back to the historical community of faith.

Lastly, Frei’s concept of the figurative unity given by the resurrection to all history has important practical consequences for the relation of the church to the world. Despite the tendencies of Lindbeck, Hauerwas, and much of the postliberal school towards a self-contained confessional community, Frei’s concept of history effectively disallows sectarianism, demanding instead that even as it witnesses *to* the world, the church also listens to the witness *of* the world to God’s providence and presence. In our time, where the church has been defeated “in its secondary vocation of providing ideological coherence, foundation, and stability to Western culture”⁶, this is a positive concept of the relation of the two, as church and world together point to their future fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

⁶ Frei, “Literal Reading”, 149.

3. Doxology

It is therefore entirely fitting that *The Identity of Jesus Christ* ends in a kind of doxological affirmation, both of the dialectical “veil” of revelation, and of “the story’s embrace of both sides of it”. Nevertheless, Frei concludes his account of identity and presence – the unity of the two and the right order for thinking about them – with a poetic meditation by George Herbert upon the sacrament:

Love is that liquor sweet and most divine
Which my God feels as blood, and I as wine.⁷

The mystery which is at the heart of the story and the person of God means that all our theology rightfully ends as it begins: with worship and adoration of the indirect presence of Christ in sacrament, in word, and in world.

This is what is ultimately meant by the ‘within faith’ perspective which Frei espouses: that we exist within the story and being of God, and have no external perspective on either his or on our own reality. Hence our study of theological grammar has been conducted all along within the all-encompassing boundary of God’s reality, so that our logic of belief ends as it begins, with the content of God in the resurrection. Therefore, as Frei observes, the theological experiment is no dry academic exercise, but is itself an offering of worship:

By and large, then, reflection about the presence of Christ is, for the believer, a pleasurable exercise in arranging or, as I should prefer to say, ordering his thinking about his faith and – in a certain sense – a praise of God by use of the analytical capacities.⁸

Indeed, the pleasure of the study of theological grammar is in its analogical kinship to revelation itself: for just as revelation reveals and conceals, so too does theological grammar reveal and conceal. Thus we have faithfully followed Frei’s logic of belief through this “exercise of ordering and praise”⁹ until we have reached this point. And here we must stop, for we have arrived at the grammatical “frontier” which is the content of God, beyond which there is nothing to say.

⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 201.

⁸ *Ibid.* 68.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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