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How is the gospel true?

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Abstract

In order to answer this question and for other purposes I intend principally to describe, comment on and include some of the thought of Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur. I include Frei because he, while unable to 'prove' Jesus' presence, can 'make sense of the gospel story' in his own way, especially with his idea of the 'history-like' quality of the story which he believes prevents its acceptance as myth. I too cannot hope to 'prove' Jesus' presence, nor would I account him as mythic. Frei does not, however, account for rhetorical persuasion. While he explains how we can accept the story as true by cutting between history and myth, it still remains to understand why and how the story is offered. But Ricoeur can help to answer the how and the why through his analysis of the coincidence of divine will and human contingency in biblical story, with Jesus as destined and God the Father as Destinator. I take this idea further by showing how in John's gospel Peter, through his own contingent acts of denial, his human fallibility, is rescued by love, the final contingency. Ricoeur also makes a case for 'manifestation' rather than 'verification' of the gospels, the one through poetic discourse superseding the other by scientific description. Hence, there is a rhetorical – literary argument for reader identity with Jesus, based in part on Aristotle's tragic emotions and in part on our human inconstancy and inconsistency as understood by Ricoeur and Montaigne to show how these qualities work out in Peter. Both Frei and Ricoeur find their way to the Jesus of faith past the Jesus of reason and myth to the Jesus of story. The goal of this article is to show how we are persuaded by John to identify with Jesus with the rhetoric of love.

To the question 'How is the gospel true?' another should be added: What is the gospel truth as a claim to faith? What truth is possible especially concerning the identity of Jesus? Perhaps we can begin to answer these questions by understanding what the gospels in their various depictions of Jesus intend to do. Another way to say that is: What is the purpose of the gospels? As John puts it in the well-known words towards the end of his gospel: 'There were many other signs that Jesus worked in the sight of the disciples, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name' (20:30, 31).[1]

[1] Quotations in English are from the NJB.

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But how are we to believe this? How does John presume to persuade us to believe? How can he hope to succeed to persuade when his 'book' records Jesus' failure to persuade his own to believe, when those who do believe doubt and deny him to the very end and beyond? There are different possible approaches to even begin to answer these questions? Many readers of the gospel, like those in the gospel itself, will hear the word of God and reject it. For others faith will be a continual struggle. For those happy few the faith is vouchsafed them in an absolute communication. Hence it is that in the text the communicative act of speaker, speech and auditor becomes narrative voice, text and reader cooperating to persuade us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, a persuasion forever incomplete. In one sense our conversion continues always, because if a plea is answered, persuasion ceases.[2] And in another, a 'pure persuasion', as in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', culminates in absolute communication, beseechingness for its own sake, attaining transcendence, leaving physical objects behind to rest in his absolutes of Beauty and Truth. 'Reverence, God, hierarchy are bound to be the ultimates of the dialectical process.'[3] Knowing God as the Word continues in the gospels forever.

With that conversion that gives us life also forever as its purpose, how are we converted? How can we who have not seen believe? That rhetoric which brings us to believe in Jesus as the Son of God depends in part on the traditional rhetoric of story: style, or how story is expressed in the voices of the languages we hear; characterization, or how characters become human in their actions, motives and emotions; and plot, what happens to those characters. Here I will consider the second and third, not the first. Suffice it to say that these basic elements of persuasion and story then and now are described by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*. If a reader is to be involved in a story to begin with, that reader must respond to character by identifying with the character. I intend to show how John does just that by establishing in the reader a strong emotional identity with Jesus.

The major obstacle to approaching story as truth is our contemporary conception of 'truth'. Biblical truth lies several paradigms behind and beyond our own scientific objectivity. With Jesus' story considered as mere myth, an historical approach attempts to justify Jesus as an historical person.

Another way is open. That way lies in seeing Jesus in part as a mythic person, as an historical person, and, above all, as a sympathetic person inspiring faith through love. To describe this rhetoric of inspiration I will begin by outlining and commenting on the work of two contemporaries,

[2] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1953), p. 271.
[3] Ibid., pp. 275–6.

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Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur. Both find their way to the Jesus of faith past the Jesus of reason and myth to the Jesus of story. We can follow as they make their cases.

What I demonstrate, building on Ricoeur, is how through story we can establish not just the truth of human emotion, but that one emotion, love, which is humanity as its best. Not reason, because reasoning as employed by Jesus in his discourses failed. Not miraculous cures, because they too failed Jesus, and not trust, because trust too failed, but love, that truth which heals our inconsistency and recalcitrance, which bring us to Jesus today not because he succeeded but because he failed. What succeeds is the imaginative reconstruction of the story so that we too will believe. Finally, imagination, the necessary faculty to a real love of Jesus generated by the gospels, remains to be understood as we can understand it today.

But first, as a literary piece, how and where does the NT fit into literary history? What are we trying to understand? Walter Ong describes the bible as oral, episodic, a plot 'stitched together', formulaic, to which 'the evangelists have added large measures of his [Jesus'] sayings . . . into . . . episodic events in his life'. Furthermore, because Jesus was a traveler like many heroes and heroines in oral narratives, organization is imposed by a journey.[4] For moderns primitive ways of understanding are, however, not true. To equate Jesus with a folk hero in the tradition of Ulysses and Beowulf seems to denigrate him. In contrast, the highly contrived plots in the gospels with their ingenious emphases and de-emphases that others find reasonable and convincing vary from the oral tradition.[5] Ong, however, also points out that the climactic linear plot comes into being in Greek drama as described by Aristotle in the *Poetics*.[6] From that Greek plot, according to Ong, orality does seem to interact with literacy to the detriment of the former, in that a climactic, linear plot does take hold with the evangelists, not without an oral residue in style and story. As hallmarks of the legacy of orality in Mark, Werner Kelber cites the 'undeveloped' character of Jesus and the disputation between Jesus and his adversaries – although he also believes Mark 'kills' orality to establish textuality by seizing control of the story, by showing the failure of the oral authorities, including the disciples, by emphasizing the death of Jesus and de-emphasizing the resurrection.[7] While that might be, I

[4] Walter Ong, 'The Psychodynamics of Oral Memory and Narrative: Some Implications for Biblical Studies', in *The Pedagogy of God's Image: Essays, Symbol and the Religious Imagination*, ed. Robert Masson (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1982), pp. 55–73.

[5] See Kingsbury, Matera, Powell, Heil and Kreutz.

[6] Ong, 'Psychodynamics', p. 56.

[7] Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), chs 2 and 3 *passim*.

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think there are other reasons for emphasis on the crucifixion and de-emphasis of the resurrection. Nevertheless, the gospel plots do follow a plotted and pieced rising action propelled by a strong sense of inevitability to the cross, a climax known by both Jesus and the 'voice' of the internalized narrator. Consequently, with a climactic, linear plot reaching back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, with orality enduring into the composition of the gospels and beyond, both influence.

Gary Comstack, who comments on both Frei and Ricoeur, believes that for them 'narrative is indispensable for understanding God's work in history'.[8] I cite them to examine the possible truth claims they make, and to follow Ricoeur's analysis of the coincidence of divine will and human contingency in biblical story as that occasions my own thinking.

In his *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Dogmatic Theology*,[9] Hans Frei pursues Christ's identity from birth to resurrection, showing first how that identity is established within a Jewish matrix, then in his public life when identity manifests in his obedience to God, and finally, with his resurrection when he fully becomes Jesus the Christ. In addition, Frei argues against both a 'mythic' or Gnostic redeemer and subsequent Christ figures like Billy Budd. As a result, he has to show how story functions to convey a 'history-like quality' preventing non-believers from 'regarding it as mere myth'.[10] How is this to be done?

Frei states: 'The true subject matter of any significant, not "merely" scientific or analytical text is thus reduced to the self-understanding . . . manifest in it, to the possibility for "existence" or the "linguistic event" which constitutes the subject matter, or to some similar thing.'[11] 'I have stressed repeatedly that in realistic narratives the depiction coincides with what it is about . . . by the interaction of character and happening'.[12] Hence, he emphasizes the story rendered to a reader whom he hopes whether 'a believing Christian or not . . . can make sense of the Gospel story'.[13] Trying not to 'prove' Christ's presence, he asks what belief in his presence involves for Christians.[14]

[8] Gary Comstock, 'Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative', *JR* (1986), pp. 117–40.

[9] Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

[10] Ibid., p. 143.

[11] Ibid., p. xvii.

[12] Ibid., p. xvi.

[13] Ibid., p. xvii.

[14] Ibid., p. 1.

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What then comes into play that 'make[s] sense' to a reader? One answer Frei bases on imagination. As readers can imagine the identity of persons like George Washington and Napoleon, we are 'forced to consent to the factuality' of Jesus which we can 'represent to ourselves imaginatively'.[15]

What sort of story, or what in a story, our own biblical story, best appeals to our good sense by recreating factuality? We cannot assume these insights from 'inside knowledge' of Jesus, or what a novelist might give us 'from the inside', but which, according to Frei, the gospel gives 'in exceedingly spare terms'.[16] Nor can we understand Jesus' intentions in the same way a biographer or historian would. Instead, we must rely on how Jesus' character is manifested externally. In the search for Jesus' identity we must also resist pulling apart person and story to lay emphasis on a subject 'in back of the story rather than on the story's sequence of external events'.[17] I agree, and will return to these points.

Bereft of an inside knowledge of Jesus, Frei believes that 'if the Gospel story is to function religiously in a way that is once historical and Christological, the central focus will have to be on the history-like narration in the final sequence, rather than on Jesus' sayings in the preaching pericopes'.[18] If 'It is on the final sequence . . . that his person . . . is most clearly accessible . . . ', the specific content of his preaching does not 'make the preacher accessible . . . '.[19] Paradoxically, according to Frei, Jesus appears most historical when he is, in a sense, least: 'if the accounts rendering the storied Jesus are to be joined to fact claims about the "historical" Jesus [giving] the historical person significant history-like religious content, the union will have to be . . . when the crucified Jesus is raised from the dead as the Christ', that moment when Jesus is most fully himself, where the fictional 'merges with factual claim whether justified or not'. At least here the 'history-like quality' prevents the non-believer from 'regarding it as mere myth',[20] the fire from one side. To convince the non-believer, the 'history-like' demolishes 'mere myth': denying myth achieves some likeness to history – the fire from the other side.

These ripostes in turn give rise to the question about whether 'certain events' and 'certain teachings' ever took place. Frei thinks it 'speculative to ask . . . how much actually happened, what he actually said', and how much is 'stylized account, illustrative of his representational character and

[15] Ibid., p. 15.
[16] Ibid., pp. 103–4, 106.
[17] Ibid., p. 101.
[18] Ibid., p. 141.
[19] Ibid., p. 142.
[20] Ibid., p. 143.

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the author's beliefs', because 'the meaning of the texts would remain the same . . . whether or not they are historical'.[21] Caught in a self-created conflict between myth and history, Frei surrenders. For both myth and history, 'history-like' should suffice, since history does not affect meaning for texts 'partially stylized and representative and partially focused on the history-like individual'.[22] But why does it not affect meaning? If not 'history-like', what does cut between history on one hand and myth on the other?

Although Frei argues for a gospel truth, he makes no effort to describe how the texts might persuade, other than to assume that 'For whomever it becomes the truth . . . it means that our lives reflect the story as in a glass darkly'.[23] Frei, who clearly and well describes how Jesus' identity develops, fails to see how we are to identify with Jesus. His only claim: 'the being and identity of Jesus in the resurrection are such that his non-resurrection becomes inconceivable'.[24] Yes, but apparently only to the good sense of the believing Christian. In a summary reference to Frei Comstock concludes: 'If we are – if we think that in an important sense the story is a true story about things – then we must accept responsibility for showing not only *how* one ought to understand the claim, but *why* it should be offered.'[25] I agree.

Paul Ricoeur pushes narrative further and deeper than Frei, not compromising with objective truth but leaping over it. Story is the way to truth in that by joining God's plan with human recalcitrance it manifests them both acting together to create history. The historian verifies in a rational way as rational theology explains, but biblical story shows history happening then and now. Furthermore, although Frei and Ricoeur both integrate the role of imagination into their discourses, they do not develop the function of imaginative perception to show how imagination enters into literary perception.

Paul Ricoeur, who does make a truth claim for story, begins by stating 'that a theology which confronts the *inevitability* of divine design with human *recalcitrance* in actions and passion, is a theology which *engenders narrative* . . . ' ('qu'une théologie qui affronte l'*inévitabilité* du dessein divin avec la *récalcitrance* des actions et des passions humaines, est une théologie qui *engendre du narratif* . . . '),[26] with the appropriate problem the rapport of the hermeneutic problem of the 'collusion' between divine design and the unpredictable

[21] Ibid., p. 132.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., pp. 170–1.
[24] Ibid., p. 145.
[25] Comstock, 'Truth or Meaning', p. 131.
[26] Paul Ricoeur, 'Le Récit Interprétatif', *RSR* 73/1 (1985), pp. 17–38.

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human contingence ('l'imprévisible contingence humaine').[27] The kernel ('noyau') for the condition of narrativization finds its rationale in the identity proclaimed between the Jesus of faith and the Jesus of history[28] in a plausible story with realistic characters.

In addressing the issue of contingence versus plan, Ricoeur believes that the introduction of contingence into the story regulates the profound plan ('introduire la contingence dans le récit . . . réglant les transformations elles-mêmes du plan profond').[29] The surface story's dynamism engenders the transformations to a semiotic and discursive plan ('la dynamique du récit à sa surface . . . engendre les transformations au plan sémiotique et discursif').[30] Contingence drives the narrative. But the semiotic of story is pushed to its limit.

To show why and where the semiotic of story works at its limit, Ricoeur cites an example: Jesus given up ('livré') placed in the 'figurative' or contingent plan[31] encounters the time to be delivered ('être livré'), a role codified according to the logic of the account: Jesus prays to his Father to postpone the hour when the one who surrenders him approaches. According to Ricoeur, the limit of story is reached when Destinator/Destined as isotopic structural entities are devoid of the plurivocity ('plurivocité') which permits a symbolic transfer to the work of 'être livré' and 'heure'. One changeable, the other not, they meet transfixed. Joined in the syntax they are 'syntagmatic'.[32]

Ricoeur does not here make the claim for truth directly. Presumably he aims, as stated, to show that when story and theology converge the theological interpretation is not superimposed on the story, but produced by the story: the christological proclamation is incorporated in the narrative. While not a *midrash*, the evangelical story, he explains, exercises the same interpretive function: divine plan meets human contingence.[33] When the two meet, story at once creates and is controlled by history.

In another earlier article, 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation', Ricoeur aims 'To recover a concept of revelation *and* a concept of reason . . . and together engender something like an understanding of faith'.[34] To do this he takes us back to the biblical 'discourses' which

[27] Ibid., p. 19.
[28] Ibid., p. 21.
[29] Ibid., p. 26.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., p. 27.
[33] Ibid., p. 17.
[34] Paul Ricoeur, 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation', *Harvard Theological Review* 70/1–2 (1977), pp. 1–37. Broader and clearer than *Le Récit*.

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in their varying genres created and sustained a people moving through a contingent history: prophetic discourse gives a 'goal to the unfolding of history'; narrative discourse marks an epic and engenders a history, the 'trace of God's act'; prescriptive discourse, the Torah, is also historical not only 'in the sense of the trace of God' found in events past and future, but also 'in the sense that it recounts the history of our practical actions and engenders the dynamics of our institutions'; wisdom discourse teaches us how to suffer; and hymnic discourse recognizes God.

Thus Ricoeur's claim for truth sets aside rational theology to carry 'revelation back to its most originary level . . . the confession of faith . . . ', when the believer 'seeks to understand himself through a better understanding of the texts of his faith' wherein history is 'unfolded' and 'engendered' to reveal 'the trace of God'.[35] Seeking in terms of 'manifestation rather than verification . . . ', Ricoeur recognizes that the idea of revelation 'violates the idea of objective truth as measured by the claim of empirical verification and falsification'. Instead, he refers to the 'manifestation of the world by the text and by scripture', a manifestation 'intended beyond the text as reference' through poetic discourse which supersedes scientific description. 'My deepest conviction is that poetic language alone restores to us that participation in or belonging – to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject.' The poetic function assumes a reference which 'obliterates' the objects which science measures. By poetry he means 'metaphorical reference', which when it 'most enters fiction . . . most speaks the truth . . . '. Here Ricoeur is not speaking about 'slavish imitation or copy', or a 'transition' or 'redescription'. No longer verification but manifestation of truth lets 'what shows itself to be . . . a proposed world, a world . . . wherein I can project my ownmost possibilities'. Metaphor describes by adding a 'split reference' which reveals the 'primordial ground of our existence . . . '. Because 'the totality of the genres' of religious discourse is poetic, our imagination responds to the text as 'poem'. For some readers, depending on their imaginative response to the poetic, the possible text claims truth by passing beyond the verifiable to the manifest.[36] With story can we cross what Ricoeur calls the 'invincible break' between 'reason and faith . . . philosophy and religion'?[37]

[35] Ibid., pp. 2, 4, 6 respectively.
[36] Ibid., sec. 11, pt 1, pp. 19–27.
[37] Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*,ed. Lewis L. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, l985), p. 152.

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Literature tells the truth as all art does. Since the *Poetics* it has been seen as an imitation of life revealed by action. If the work of conversion is to be carried on through a text as in the gospels, the readers must identify with the hero, Jesus. To identify with Jesus readers must bind to him emotionally. Aristotle's two tragic emotions are: pity for the unsought tragedy of the hero, and fear for ourselves if what happened to an extraordinary person could happen to us. In his brief discussion of emotions in the *Poetics* Aristotle points out that 'through pity and fear it [tragedy] accomplishes cleansing through emotions such as these' ('δι' ελεου και φοβου περαινουσα την τον τοιουτον παθεματον καθαρσιν.').[38] In addition to pity and fear Aristotle allows for other emotions 'such as these'. To the emotions bringing catharsis I would add love, assuming that a cathartic involvement with Jesus provoked by pity, fear and love leads to identification with him. It is too much to ask love for Oedipus, too little to merely pity Jesus. Emotions bind the reader to the character Jesus as, indeed, the disciples too are emotionally bound to Jesus despite frequent lapses.[39] To identify with Jesus readers must know him as a human, because we can identify with someone like ourselves despite their higher rank as long as we see that person as one whose suffering was brought about unintentionally by an understandable, common and forgivable flaw. We do not identify with 'a perfectly good man passing from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it simply shocks us'. Nor again a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity, nor the 'downfall of a villain', which according to Aristotle might satisfy the moral sense but inspires neither pity nor fear. The person's misfortune, like our own, cannot be brought on by vice or depravity, but by some understandable error or frailty common among us. Aristotle also describes 'Tragedy [as] an imitation of persons above the common level . . . who by representing men quick or slow to anger, or with other defects of character should preserve the type and yet ennoble it'.[40]

The evangelists, consequently, are left with two problems not usually inherent for authors. To create reader identity for Jesus they must de-emphasize his divinity to emphasize his humanity. To emphasize his humanity, however, Jesus must be imbued with human frailty, a frailty that contributes to his tragic end by creating enemies who charge him with

[38] *Aristotle's Ars Poetica*, ed. R. Kassel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), sec. 1449B, Online, Perseus, Tufts U, Internet, 16 Sept. 1999.

[39] In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle's basis grounds for appeal are to reason, to emotion and to the character of the speaker as needed.

[40] Aristotle, 'The Nature of Tragedy', trans. S. N. Butcher, in *Poetics, Our Heritage of World Literature*, ed. Stith Thompson and John Gussner (New York: Dryden, 1949).

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blasphemy and kill him, an 'unmerited end' in the Aristotelian sense.[41] The second problem is linked to the first. While pity and fear might have been enough to bind audiences to Oedipus or Antigone, they are not enough to bind us to Jesus. We can understand why a great and good person can be brought down by error, but that alone does not inspire love. What Jesus fears to do in his human weakness he does for love of us. Oedipus suffers for his own redemption, Jesus for ours. In laying down his life for us he inspires love. As a result, we can understand his anger with the money changers, his impatience with the crowds and his followers when they question and fail to understand him, his 'questionable' choice of followers, who love him and are loved by him despite their doubts and misunderstandings, and above all by his fear of the cross. These human failings are understandable. When Jesus loves, he loves with a human heart: when provoked he is provoked with the same heart. Out of human frailty we love, as Jesus loves out of his. Love justifies, as Jesus pointed out many times. If so, Jesus is realistic as a human who loves and is loved, the strongest bond of emotional identity, for we are as he is. Jesus loves and is loved because of, not despite, the human frailty of the lovers. But what of human frailty in divinity?

To be seen as human Jesus himself de-emphasizes his divinity by performing miracles reluctantly, by requesting silence from the healed, by avoiding Jerusalem as long as possible, by referring to himself in the third person, by using the title 'Son of man', not 'Son of God', which title, as Harvey points out,[42] presumes against God's oneness, and by his impatience even anger with the disciples, individuals like Nicodemus, and the crowds who follow him. On the cross he seemingly despairs, as described by both Matthew and Mark. At Gethsemane he prays for the cup to pass. Finally, at the climax, his crucifixion, he is mocked as King of the Jews whose God will not save him. Here on the cross he fully establishes his identity with us, joining us in our human suffering. In response to the crises of the cross his readers should meet, know him and be transformed by love for him before resurrection establishes his divinity. Even then his resurrected body retains human form and function as he speaks and eats with the disciples while at the same time appearing through walls. By the disciples' absence from the sabbath vigil, by fear, hesitation, disbelief and unrecognition on the part of the women at the tomb and the disciples afterwards, his resurrection, save for the commands given, almost becomes anticlimactic in the gospels and especially in Mark. Yet, because both participants and readers are emotionally

[41] For a discussion of the charge, law and politics involved, see A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

[42] Ibid., ch. 6.

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involved with Jesus, I cannot accept the notion that the gospels are a sub-text for contentious Christian communities and others contemporary with the evangelists. Jesus' contentions with his auditors reflect his own trials, reactions and failings which lead to the cross. Seeing him as human we know him and love him and he us, a hermeneutic that rings true. Emphasized by the reactions of those close to him before and after his crucifixion, the balance between Jesus' divinity and humanity tips towards his humanity. Emphatic also are the heretical denials of his humanity in one form or the other by Priscillianists, Docetists, Valentinians and Apollinarians. Paradoxically, if we are to believe, the evangelists, in order to claim him as the Messiah, must first show him in the fullness of his humanity. There is no other way. We too might then react as his followers did, with belief and disbelief.

The cross seemingly kills Jesus' humanity, the Jesus the disciples loved. The evangelists dared to convert their readers by emphasizing Jesus' humanity, an effect which continues after his death into his resurrection when the women and the disciples not only fail to recognize the divine Jesus, but also hesitate in their fear and disbelief.

All too human we too continue to doubt, deny and disbelieve, misunderstand and fail to recognize Jesus for what he is. Such is human recalcitrance. What remains is for Jesus to ask us as he asks Peter, 'Do you love me?' We can love this human, literary Jesus. We can love as imperfect human beings, even because we are imperfect. We can love the gospel Jesus, not an abstract proposition. In order to comprehend we do not have to be perfect readers, as Frei would have us. As Jesus suffers with and for us in the fullness of his humanity, we can identify with his love. This identity which compensates for division is offered to readers rhetorically through the text.[43] Our consubstantiality with divinity extends into the idealistic leading to mystery in all human relations.[44] Hence, a pure persuasion is the 'furthest one can go in matters of rhetoric', not for the sake of advantage, but for both a 'satisfaction intrinsic to the saying'[45] and for 'love of the exercise',[46] continuing without end and locking reverence, God and hierarchy together in the ultimate dialectic, the ultimate transcendence and a mystery. Successful dialectic ends. Again, and again paradoxically, this divine dialectic, bound in love and human inconsistency, succeeds by not succeeding, necessarily continuing for ever.

[43] Ibid., p. 22.
[44] Ibid., p. 46.
[45] Ibid., p. 269.
[46] Ibid., p. 294.

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Despite my own emphasis on character, Aristotle insists that plot is the 'soul of tragedy' with character holding 'the second place'. For a pagan, tragic inevitability, the driving force of the classic plot, overrode evitability. Left without choice, the pagan hero could only accept fate. The poet as 'maker' makes plots centered on action foreshadowed so that an audience can sense an inevitable end. When that foreshadowed event occurs, it produces a sense of 'wonder' which does not accompany a chance event. By withholding an element of plot – either what will happen, where or when it will happen or how it will happen – the author builds suspense. But the audience knows something will happen. In such a way was Greek fatalism played out. A tragic flaw led inevitably to a tragic end. Christians, however, must contend with human contingency marked in biblical texts by recalcitrance and unpredictability – Montaigne's inconsistency of human action. 'Je croy des hommes plus mal aisément la constance que toute autre chose, et rien plus aisément que l'inconstance' ('It is harder for me to believe in men's consistency than in anything, and easier to believe in their inconsistency').[47] Yet our inconsistency consistently produces, as the story of Adam and Eve illustrates, human error which if unavoidable is not irredeemable. In the gospels Jesus himself cannot escape his tragic end on the cross which he knows is coming. Peter, the disciples and other followers are not afflicted, at least to their knowledge, with an end they cannot avoid by an act of will, even though Jesus does advise Peter cryptically of the manner of his death. In short, we are met with Ricoeur's problem of the 'collusion' between divine design and unpredictable human action. At Gethsemane Jesus prays for a deliverance he cannot avoid. In the gospel human contingency works out freely in Peter, Judas, Thomas, the disciples and other followers who are frequently uncertain in their allegiance to Jesus, and they his chosen. On this point in Mark's gospel Ricoeur shows the 'miscomprehension' ('mécomprhénsion') 'transpiring' the whole story: the treason, fear, flight and abandonment.[48] At Caesarea Philippi Jesus refers to Peter as 'Satan' (in Matthew also). Later, Jesus tells Peter that he will betray him three times before the cock crows. Even though Peter denies this, it happens (Mark 14:30). While Jesus prays alone at Gesthemane, his disciples sleep. Peter does deny him as the cock crows, his betrayal another factor in the inevitable march of Jesus to the cross to which the inevitability of human error has brought him. They refuse the Christology of the Son of man.[49] Peter's denial, Ricoeur concludes, affords

[47] Montaigne, 'De I'inconstance de nos actions', in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Albert Thibaudet et Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, 1962, Pléiade edn), p. 316.
[48] Ricoeur, *Le Récit*, p. 30.
[49] Ibid., p. 33.

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the reader uncertainty in the measure that the strong affirmation of faith proffered to Peter breaks on the ambiguity of all that happens.[50]

God must rely on fallible humans to enact his will. The uncertainty of our actions is resolved at the end of John's gospel when the risen Jesus, matching Peter's three denials, asks him three times, 'Do you love me?' Peter says, 'Yes, Lord, you know everything; you know I love you' (21:15–17). How do Peter's answers resolve human fallibility?

Contingency vs. destiny? Jesus knew he was to die, although when was uncertain. We too know that we will die inevitably, our tragic end on a human level. Life to that point is contingent. God reverts to contingence in choosing Abraham, David, Jacob and Peter, just as he chooses other uncertain humans to carry out his will.[51] In his humanity Jesus rebels against the plan as we do until the cross reveals God's plan. After Jesus' death human fear, ignorance and denial come at the tomb and later. With no corpse, the apparitions uncertain, the women and the disciples face the unknown beyond death. What is certain in human experience is love – our desire to love and be loved for what we are. As we are free to desert and deny, we are free also to be lovers. As Jesus asks Peter he asks each one of us: 'Do you love me?' Here human contingency and divine destiny meet and are resolved if the answer is 'yes'. Choosing to love Jesus at once resolves, absolves and dissolves our recalcitrance. While love justifies human inconsistency, it is itself contingent, and never easy.

Some 'forms and ways' of biblical rhetoric remain to be remarked. John admits that 'There was much else that Jesus did; if it were written down in detail, I do not suppose the world itself would hold all the books that would be written' (21:25). Accordingly, John has 'shaped' reality to unify the plot 'to center round an action', creating 'a structural union of parts', as Aristotle has it. A play and short story especially have little space in which to focus on a life, so the author must carefully select those events that best convey that life. Not all events are relevant, only those which contribute to character by bringing that character to life through conflict brought out by speech and action. In the gospels those conflicts leading to the cross are central to the dramatic focus of the plots. Placed in the conflict's iron vise we see the human Jesus struggling with his own destiny and those around him in order to deliver his message.

Aristotle believes too that poetry, 'more philosophical and a higher thing than history', expresses what might happen, the probable; history expresses what has happened. Poetry expresses the universal, history the particular.

[50] Ibid., p. 35.

[51] Was Jesus' place in history in itself contingent?

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Even so, 'what might happen' does not dismiss the possibility of a tragedy about what has happened as the poet imitates actions. 'And if he chances to take an historical subject he is nonetheless a poet; for there is no reason why some real events should not have that internal probability or possibility which entitles an author to the name of poet.'[52] From which real events the poet can find universal truth, not without critically changing reality, as Shakespeare did in his history plays, as the evangelists do in their gospels.

If literature aims to tell the truth, if this knowledge can be realized by our emotional identification with a realistic character, can we reasonably ask how well we know the gospel Jesus? Can the gospel Jesus be substituted for the historical Jesus? Peter Croffert offers this: 'Character in a document does not exist independent from the cultural matrix within which the characters are supposed to operate.'[53] While character is rooted in time and place, Jesus speaks out of the Mediterranean world of yesterday to us today. Characters can exceed the limits of time, place and mortality, as many have who unlike Jesus are fictional: the Wife of Bath, Falstaff, Scarlett O'Hara and Rip Van Winkle. All were patently flawed humans: the Wife of Bath, unchaste and unapologetic; Falstaff, a whoremonger and drunk; Scarlett, devious and willful; and Rip Van Winkle, a negligent father and husband. All, nevertheless, were capable of love for others, for life itself, and in return were themselves lovable. All never lived, but continue to live. We have only to look around us, or at ourselves. Literature, freed from slavish adherence to fact, can and does reach further and deeper into human experience to reveal what is 'true', which is not the facts of that experience, but the truths of human nature. As Ricoeur writes in his 'Reply to L. S. Mudge', 'Even fictions are about a world . . . the world displayed by Biblical stories and which shatters our ordinary beliefs about the "real" world is not a historical world, a world of real events, but the world of the text'.[54] Do we have to know that the events are 'real', or that we must understand the first-century cultural 'texture' in order to grasp and be grasped by the gospels? And are not those gospels the major source for knowledge of the historical Jesus?

Literary form governs content. The gospels are not plays, and the world would wait almost two millennia for the novel to develop. While the play reveals conflict and character externally by focused action, the novel's strength, indeed its *raison d'être*, lies in its capacity to permit in-depth character depiction from inside the mind. Relying on action, the play reveals character

[52] Aristotle, 'Tragedy', in *Poetics*, p. 144.

[53] Peter Croffert, 'Relationships between Social-Scientific, Literary and Rhetorical Interpretation of Texts', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26 (1996), pp. 45–55.

[54] Ricoeur, *Essays*, p. 44.

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through the choices that character makes which enhance conflict, the most intense action and the focus of drama. The audience cannot know what that dramatic character is thinking except through the artificial devices of the aside or the soliloquy. In the gospels, omniscient narrative voices know where Jesus came from and where he is going. To some extent these voices, the internalized voices of the storyteller, also permit a limited knowledge of Jesus' feelings, and the evangelists do just that. In Mark, for example, the narrative voice tells the reader, 'Jesus looked at him steadily and he was filled with love for him [the rich young man] . . . ' (10:21).

The narrative voice also moves the story along. We were a long way from the modern novel and the inner life of a character which at times ignores exterior events. Nevertheless, I believe the gospels are more drama than fiction. John's gospel especially, with its frequent spoken clashes between Jesus, various individuals and the crowds, would in a free verse translation make a good play.[55] This external dramatic focus combined with the limited omniscience of the narrative voice restricts perception of Jesus' inner life, at least as we would have it today. Earlier I mentioned Werner Kelber's suggestion that Mark 'kills' the oral legacy to establish textuality, leaving as a residual legacy of that culture Jesus' undeveloped character.[56] Whether or not Mark killed orality, Jesus' undeveloped character could result from an oral residue in a gospel style focused on verbal conflict and dramatic action as described. If the evangelists, or a source, did not know Jesus well, that too could account for showing him as he was known to others.

While I have emphasized the emotional binding of reader to text, Ricoeur introduces imagination, concluding 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation' with 'we must say that the imagination is that part of ourselves that responds to the text as a Poem . . . '. Also, in articulating the rhetoric of religion Wilhelm Wuellner sees three aspects converging into a coherent concept of a 'sacred rhetoric': the usefulness of certain categories of Greek rhetoric to biblical exegesis; the emphasis on the connection between stylistic features and emotions in sacred texts; and the pivotal role of imagination 'in generating emotions and thought about God, or love and knowledge of God'.[57] Imagination, even today, or especially today, responds more to text than to any visual media because our imaginations, freer to roam within

[55] See Clayton R. Bowen, 'The Fourth Gospel as Dramatic Material', *JBL* 49 (1930), pp. 292–315.

[56] Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*.

[57] Wilhelm Wuellner, 'Biblical Exegesis and the History of Rhetoric', in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, ed. S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 492–513.

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a text, in the visual media are confined by the imaginations of directors, actors, set designers, musicians, etc. The book is almost always better than the movie. I agree with Wuellner's 'categories', and with Klaus Berger, who emphasizes not only reader identification with the text as an end, but favors also a new method of biblical rhetoric with 'its own forms and ways'. As he puts it, 'Everything that leads the reader's psyche towards a goal has to be regarded as a rhetorical element.'[58] Imagination, engaged by interaction with text, is that faculty wherein all elements come into play to produce emotional attachment. Today that faculty diminishes. But an analysis of changes in the play of psycho-social imaginative perception in the West would be out of place here.[59]

For my own purpose it is enough to assert that specifically the literary imagination plays on a narrow line between reality and fiction. Being neither, it can fall either way. A schizophrenic, for example, sees illusion through reality, a normal reality through illusion. For one reality becomes an illusion; for the other the illusion becomes reality. A normal person, however, knows there is a difference; a schizophrenic does not. Ultimately, it is possible to assert that reality can be seen only through illusion, and, for a time, illusion becomes the only reality. Literature, which dances on that paradox, is and is not reality. If the illusion is too realistic, too close to life, then it cannot be accepted as real. Too close and it lacks perspective. Truth must be distorted to be understood. Too little distortion and we see only that reality we cannot already see; too much and it is no longer reality. As Emily Dickinson aptly put it, 'Tell it slant.'

All of which suggests to me that the truth of which I have been writing seems in the gospels to some to come across mythically as illusion, and to others literally as history. I hope for a middle ground where the gospels can be taken for what they are. About that delicate balance I cannot be sanguine.

The poet imposes a probable order on events made possible by human action, contingent in Christianity, determined in paganism, but action nevertheless. Christian contingency, which certainly has the advantage of surprise, coincides finally in the NT with God's will both through the disciples chosen and in their mission mandated and undertaken. Knowing Jesus, the evangelists direct and comment on action, intending to express their belief in a way that will appeal to readers. Does that mean that Jesus did

[58] Wuellner, 'Rhetorical Criticism, New Form Criticism and NT Hermeneutics', in *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, pp. 393–6.

[59] Although I have done some of that work in my 'Poiesis, Mind and Reality: Romanticism to Imagism', *Journal of Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 4/1 (1978–9), pp. 63–79.

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not say what the evangelists quote him as saying, or do what they describe him as doing? If he did not say, think or do everything written in the gospels then it must be probable or possible for him to have done so. Allowing for some space – time distance among the evangelists they are consistent, even allowing for their well-known differences. Accordingly, given the similarities, even allowing for the 'Q' source, I believe Jesus did say, think and do much of what is ascribed to him in the gospels. If he did not, what he is quoted as saying and described as thinking and doing is probable and consistent with his character and therefore 'true'. In a literary work consistency of character is more important than fact. The evangelists provide more than one way to truth, each with his own perspective and emphasis. We are fortunate to have the four evangelists each filling out the other, each telling the truth as he sees it. In the gospels God himself condescended to become a poet.

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