

The Meanings of History: Event and Interpretation in the Bible and Theology

N. T. Wright
University of St Andrews

On November 19, 2017, the eighth annual Analytic Theology Lecture was delivered in Boston, Massachusetts by N.T. Wright before the American Academy of Religion. His lecture, titled "The Meanings of History: Event and Interpretation in the Bible and Theology," is printed here for the first time.

Introduction

I was surprised to be invited to give this lecture, but am grateful to have had the opportunity. I have been taking part in recent years in the "Logos Institute" at St Andrews, whose subject is "Analytical and Exegetical Theology," and whose aim is to hold together the two disciplines thus named, which often seem barely to have heard of each other, let alone to be linked. This is demanding. The project is in its early stages. But some issues are already becoming clear, and urgent. One such is the question of "history."

Theologians routinely invoke scriptural authority; scriptures require exegesis; and exegesis (of any text) is a branch of history. Without history, exegesis collapses into eisegesis, or mere fantasy-projection. (Some kinds of writing may invite or require fantasy-reading, but to recognise that, as a matter of genre, is itself a historical judgment.) Biblical exegesis, more specifically, is a branch of ancient history, that specific branch which aims to discover what a particular biblical text first meant to writer and readers. Theology will wish to say more, but ought not to say less. And, with that "more," we bring historical exegesis into engagement with systematic, analytic and philosophical theology. We exegetes often wish those disciplines took historical exegesis more seriously. Any Christian theology worthy of the name cannot do without it, and ought not to try.

Christian theology, after all, normally speaks of the divine inspiration of scripture. Despite popular impressions, this does not mean closing down questions; it means opening them up.¹ Belief in scriptural inspiration ought to generate the humble position of allowing the text to say new things which our traditions had forgotten or distorted. Those of us who in 2017 celebrated the (admittedly ambiguous) Reformation anniversary want to insist, with Luther, on *sola scriptura*, the primacy of scripture over all our traditions. More or less all churches say something like that in their formularies, thereby committing themselves at least *de jure* to expend rigorous energy discerning what the biblical

¹ See Wright (2011).

texts actually said and meant. Sadly, this commitment has often been lacking *de facto*.

After all, some kinds of theology may neither need nor want history, but Christian theology has no choice. We face questions about incarnation, “salvation history,” and so on; but that’s just the start. “History” is not simply a lump of clay preventing Docetic hot-air balloons from taking off into the clouds (*senkrecht nach oben* to meet the Barthian *senkrecht von oben*!) and never being seen again. Those who pray that God’s kingdom will come and his will be done “on earth as in heaven” are *ipso facto* committed to focusing on real life, real space-time-and-matter existence, *not as an illustration of abstract truth but as the ultimate reality to which the best abstract truths bear humble witness*. According to the New Testament, Jesus himself—the human being, the man from Galilee who died on a cross—is the full, definitive revelation of who the One True God really is and what he’s doing. He is not an example or illustration, even the ultimate illustration, of an abstract principle or a true doctrine. Principles and doctrines refer to him, and must defer to him. This means history.

I would like to go further here, and propose—though this will be a tentative probe rather than a full-dress exposition—that history, properly understood, might be a missing ingredient to help Analytic Theology accomplish what, to an outside and inexpert observer, appear to be its goals. Those goals seem to include the hope of achieving, by rigorous thinking alone, what Bishop Butler had hoped to achieve roughly three hundred years ago but which had seemed nearly impossible after 1755, namely, a Christian apologetic which might begin in the world of space, time and matter and end by speaking of the Triune God.² Of course, this might not be thought a “natural theology” *stricto sensu*, since if we begin with Jesus himself, and with the biblical testimony to him, we are not avoiding sources normally thought of as “revelation.” But Jesus himself was a figure of the real world. The gospels are real documents from the real world. To dismiss them as “natural” evidence because the Christian tradition has seen them as “revelation,” and to dismiss Jesus similarly because the Christian tradition has confessed him to be God incarnate, looks like the sceptic screening out the evidence before the trial. And, in scripture itself, Jesus himself—the human being, the historical man from Galilee who died on a cross—is seen as the full and definitive revelation of who the One True God really is and what he has done, is doing, and will do. I propose, in other words, that a careful understanding of what history is, and how we “do history” in relation to the New Testament, may itself be more than simply a necessary adjunct to the theological task. It may be the central motor. This may be heard as bad news by those whose encounter with supposedly historical study of early Christianity has been confusing and negative. But that itself, as the argument progresses, may be part of the point.

As I have already suggested, historical study of early Christianity demands (as all true history demands) a mixture of humility (to recognise that our ways of thinking may not be those of the authors of the texts), penitence (to acknowledge that our traditions may have distorted original meanings and that we have preferred the distortions to the originals), and love (in that, as I shall explain, we

² I have explored this more fully in my 2018 Gifford Lectures, scheduled for publication in 2019. On the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the views of Butler before it and Voltaire after it. See Naiman (2002), discussed in Wright (2004). Joseph Butler’s widely-discussed work is *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (Butler 1736).

are called to a hermeneutic which delights in the otherness of the text). Or did we suppose that by being “analytic” we could escape from the methodological outworkings of Christian virtue? History is the risky, public discourse which matches and celebrates the divine risk, the divine humility, of incarnation itself.

Shying away from that risk has been endemic among Jesus’ followers from the beginning. Christians in general and theologians in particular are often tempted to copy Peter at Caesarea Philippi: he assumed he knew best what Jesus’ Messiahship ought to mean, and tried to insist on it against Jesus’ own protest. Or again, we might find ourselves copying Peter in Gethsemane, where Peter tried to defend Jesus against risk but denied him shortly afterwards (and perhaps the attempted defence was the real “denial”?). One might even see these as the standard Petrine temptations, demanding the proper Petrine penitence and recommitment we find in John 21. Jesus resists our attempts either to define him or to defend him. He demands that we pay fresh attention to what he was actually doing, saying, thinking, and being. That means taking history seriously.

What is “History”?

But what do we mean by the word “history” itself? Many professional historians have written books asking “what is history,” dealing with the subject at a large scale; but I want to go behind that to some even more basic data.³ The word itself is slippery and ambiguous, and there are signs (just the sort of thing for which an Analytic Theologian ought to be on the alert) that the relevant discussions have slid to and fro across different meanings, producing confusion and worse. A sports commentator, seeing a racing driver crashing his car, declares, “He’s history!” The next minute a politician says it’s important to be “on the right side of history.” The first of these means “past events that are gone for good and now irrelevant”; the second means “the inexorable movement of events towards a utopian goal.” An article in the periodical *Foreign Affairs* says that “history is full of surprises” and then, in the same paragraph, that “history is driven by the interaction of geopolitics, institutions, and ideas” (Kotkin 2017, 54). The first of these means “the sum total of all past events”; the second means “the way that important events play out.” In the same issue, a reviewer describes a book as “an exhaustive history” and reports on someone saying to a Prime Minister, “I hope history will be kind to you” (Menon 2017, 122-126). The first of these is “history” as an *assemblage of all that is known about* the relevant past; the second is “history” as *evaluation* of a particular set of actions. At this popular level there is little confusion. We shift easily enough between these and other shades of meaning. But in theology they cause real problems, and as analytic thinkers we dare not rest content with serial ambiguity. So let’s begin at the beginning, with the dictionary.

The largest Oxford English Dictionary lists four basic meanings of “history,” the fourth of which subdivides importantly. (There are four other oblique meanings, including “history” in the phrase “natural history” which normally designates the study of fauna and flora. These extra meanings don’t affect our

³ See Carr (1961) and many other classic texts, as well as the more recent Burke (2018). A creative, fresh approach can be found in part one of Mason (2016). My own earlier account is in chapter four of Wright (1992).

discussion.) Tracing the word to its Latin and Greek roots, the English word is defined in terms of (1) an account of past events, (2) a continuous written narrative of select past events, (3) the discipline which deals with such things, and then (4) the past events themselves. In more detail, these are:

(1) the relation of incidents (in earlier usage the incidents could be imaginary, but in recent centuries the word “history” indicates at least an intention that they be true to reality);

(2) a written narrative contributing a continuous methodical record of important or public events, especially those connected with a particular country, people, individual, etc.;

(3) that branch of knowledge which deals with past events, as recorded in writings or otherwise ascertained; the formal record of the past; the study of the formation and growth of communities and nations;

(4) (a) a series of events, of which a story is, or may be, told;

(b) the whole train of events connected with a particular country, person, etc. This sense also admits of a “pregnant sense,” highlighting “an eventful career” or “a course of existence worthy of record”;

(c) The aggregate of past events in general; the course of events or human affairs.

The *OED*, rightly following etymology, has set these meanings in the opposite order to what we might presume today. As one recent writer puts it, “history” can refer to the past, to the study of the past, or to the representation of the past.⁴ The *OED* does it the other way around, ending with that larger, arm-waving category, “the aggregate of past events in general,” meaning anything at all that happened in, or that belongs to, the past.

There are, in addition, two other meanings, not noted in the *OED*, which have crept in over the last two hundred years or so. First, there is the opening up of “events in general” to include the future as well as the past (“the future history of our country” meaning “whatever course of events will occur here”). Second, there is the suggestion that with the word “history” we are invoking not merely the past in general but “the past that we know is moving in a particular direction” or developing in a particular way (“being on the right side of history”).

To get a handle on all this—and to prepare for my biblical and theological reflections—I offer here a fairly rigorous analysis of how the word “history” is currently used, starting where the *OED* ends and working back, though with more refinements on the way.

⁴ Green (2009, 2.830).

1. History as “the past”

1.a: “History” is the whole of the past, the huge accumulation of events, some known but almost all not, that have happened at some time prior to the present moment. When we say “at some point in history,” this is the sense we have in mind (though, as I suggested, we might today include the future as well). With this we associate the adjective “historical” in the general sense: “at some historical moment.” The noun and adjective regularly convey the assertion that something actually happened, as opposed to being fictitious: “the death of Mr. Rochester’s first wife” is not “historical,” but “the death of the last pterodactyl” is, even though we don’t know when or where it took place.

There is a muddle to be cleared up here. English uses the adjective “historic” to indicate that an event *carried particular significance*. The inauguration of the first African-American President was an *historic* event; nobody doubts that it was “historical” (that it really happened). But many today have come to use “historical” where “historic” would be technically correct.

1.b: “History” is the knowable past, the far lesser accumulation of events for which, usually by accident, we have evidence. Without evidence, events cannot be “written up” as “history” in sense 2 below. Blake’s question, “And did those feet in ancient time walk upon England’s mountains green?”—invoking the tradition of the boy Jesus making a voyage to the British Isles—might invite a pious or romantic “yes,” but in the absence of evidence the answer to that question, and to the three which follow it, will be “no, actually; that isn’t a matter of history.”⁵ Here we enter the sliding scale of epistemology: the Cartesian sceptic will doubt as much as possible, but almost nobody doubts that Jesus of Nazareth died by crucifixion, or that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

We note that both 1a and 1b will include the perceptions, reflections, and reactions, if any, of participants or observers at the time. Studying what Josephus thought as he toured the walls of Jerusalem, looking at thousands of crucified Jews and trying to rescue his friends, is itself part of the overall “history” of AD 70. Asking whether Jesus of Nazareth believed it was his vocation to be crucified, and if so what meaning he attached to that, is part of “history” in this sense. History, as we shall see, regularly involves the attempt to think into the minds of people who think differently to ourselves.⁶

2. History is the written account of past events

2.a: “History” is the written account of past events, claiming to be *definitive or complete* (“*The History of the Civil War*”). The positivism latent in much western modernity pushes towards such a “final” account, just as, in criminal trials, the basic question is “what happened” and “who did it,” looking for a definite answer.

⁵ See Blake’s “Jerusalem,” cited in Gardner (1972, 486). For a discussion, see Goslee (1974, 105-125).

⁶ The great historian Asa Briggs explained why he and other historians had been recruited to the Bletchley Park code-breaking establishment during World War II: historians, he said, were “well read, drawn to lateral thinking, and taught to get inside the mind of people totally different from themselves” (Briggs 2011, 78).

Most history, however, is not like this. We therefore move to the more modest meaning:

2.b: "History" is the written account of past events, acknowledging its partial and incomplete character ("A History of the Civil War"). This is realistic, since all history-writing proceeds by selection and arrangement (see below). The only time you can say everything is when there is almost nothing to be said. Selection and arrangement, of course, move us into the areas examined under 3 and 4 below, but we are talking about the way the word is used: history 1 is events; history 2 is the written accounts of events. The Peloponnesian War itself is history 1; Thucydides' book of that name is history 2.

Both of these may well include an account of the way in which past events were re-actualized in a community through memory, tradition, and symbolic action. The annual Passover is an obvious example. An account of the original Exodus might well include an account of subsequent Passover practice. The same would apply to the Maccabean revolt and the subsequent Hannukah celebrations. Conversely, the rituals themselves constitute fresh retellings of the original event.

One normal German word for sense 1 (past events) is *Geschichte*; for sense 2 (the written account of past events) a normal word would be *Historie*. Unfortunately, Rudolf Bultmann used these terms very differently, employing *Historie* to mean a combination of 1 and 2, the mere events and/or the narrative that purported to describe them, and *Geschichte* to mean something like sense 4 below, events and/or the telling of events *that carried theological freight and meaning*.⁷ Among the resultant confusions is the way in which the word "historical"—especially in the phrase "historical Jesus," to which we shall return—is sometimes associated with this sense (Jesus *as historians reconstruct him*) as opposed to sense 1 (Jesus *as he actually was in the past*). Sometimes, it is implied, the first of these is the only thing we can—or should!—really talk about . . .

3. History is the task of researching and writing about past events

3a. "History" is the task: of researching and writing about things that actually happened, as opposed to fiction or fantasy. Category 3 is what actual historians think they are doing: "doing history." We distinguish this from, as we say, *making* history, i.e. doing things which bring about certain meaning-laden effects; the word is there tilting towards sense 4 below. Julius Caesar both *made* history and *wrote* history; so did Winston Churchill; but this is rare. Most Romans would only ever know what Caesar had done in Gaul through Caesar's own account (and his carefully staged "triumphs"), so that he was not only accomplishing "facts on the ground" but, through his writings and displays, was ensuring the victory of his way of looking at the events over any possible rivals. Churchill was doing something similar in writing the history of the Second World War, though in his case there were and are millions of other sources against which his account could be checked. In any case, the history that is "written" is history 3; the history that is "made" is history 1, and/or 4.

⁷ On which see Moltmann (1985, 130).

The distinction between 3a and 3b is subtle but important. When a distraught relative arrives at the scene of the tragedy, they may say “I just want to know what happened.” There will be a time for evaluation, for blame or excuse, but the first task is to establish what actually occurred. When Leopold von Ranke famously declared that his aim was to say how things had actually happened (“wie es eigentlich gewesen”)⁸ he was not, despite later misrepresentation, declaring an ambitious positivism, but rather a modest refusal to offer grand overarching interpretative schemes, such as some of his contemporaries were trying out, in which the past could be “judged” and lessons learnt for the future.⁹ He was not claiming that everything could be known, or indeed that what could be known could be verified quasi-mathematically. He was merely contrasting his own attempt at simple *description of events* with the then popular ambition of large-scale *evaluation*. He was setting himself a task (3a), that of researching and producing a narrative (2) telling about things that actually happened (1b) (including things that, though themselves leaving no trace, were certainly to be inferred from events for which there was evidence). On the way, he was forswearing any big-picture evaluations such as the Heglians wanted to offer 4.

Of course, von Ranke too needed to select and arrange. He was perfectly aware that through that door, necessarily left open because the only alternative is mere unsorted “chronicle,” more subtle kinds of personal evaluations could creep in. But, unlike some of his contemporaries, he was aiming at 2 (a written account) and 1 (what actually happened), not at 4 (what it all “meant” within some grand teleological scheme). The Idealist treats sense 1 as the incidental raw material for the big overarching theory; von Ranke’s attempted realism aimed at sense 1, “what actually happened.”¹⁰

Von Ranke was thereby echoing an aim which goes way back in history-writing. The fourteenth-century John Barbour knew, and displayed, the difference between the pleasure of a good tale (whether true or not), the importance of remembering the great deeds of those long gone, and the pleasure of learning what actually happened (“the thing rycht as it wes”).¹¹ But, since all history that goes beyond mere chronicle or annals (one of the early accounts of “history” cited in the *OED* makes this distinction fundamental) involves selection and arrangement, and since (to say it again) all selection and arrangement involve some principle, and since the principles are held by the human beings who are doing the selecting and arranging, this is bound to move towards 4 below; though it would be a juvenile mistake to suppose that because selection and arrangement are always involved we can never attain to true knowledge of what happened in the past but must always collapse into subjectivism, into knowledge of the inside of our own imaginations. (That would be the equivalent, in historical theory, of the phenomenalist’s trap, supposing that when we think we are talking about this-worldly material realities we are actually only talking about our own sense-data. That way lies solipsism.¹²)

⁸ Von Ranke (1885, vii). People often add “ist,” but von Ranke did not.

⁹ On von Ranke, see Stern (1973, 16), as well as the section on von Ranke at 55.

¹⁰ On the confusions caused by different labelings of von Ranke and his opponents, see chapter three of my forthcoming Gifford lectures.

¹¹ See Lewis (1964, 177).

¹² See my discussion in Wright (1992, 33).

3b. “History” is the *task*: of discerning and displaying some kind of connection, pattern or principle—and hence, some *meaning*—within things that actually happened. Sense 3a thus easily and rightly slips over into 3b: selection and arrangement involve some kind of principle, and the question is then whether the historian allows the evidence to suggest the principle or insists on superimposing an alien principle on the evidence (rather like the anthropologists’ distinction between an “emic” and an “etic” account of local phenomena). If (roughly following Wittgenstein) we see the meaning of a word as its use in the sentence, and the meaning of a sentence as its use in a paragraph or larger unit, then the “meaning,” and perhaps the “importance,” of an event or a sequence of events will be *its perceived role within some larger narrative or symbol-set*. But: whose narrative? Which symbol-set? However much von Ranke disclaimed any grand ambitions, he had to have some organising principles or he wouldn’t have been able even to begin. He had no intention of saying “what actually happened” at every moment of every day in every house and street in Germany; he had to select and arrange. This, then, is where we find the word “meaning” standing shyly beside us as we contemplate the historical task; and “meaning” brings with it the question of consequences. The “meaning” of Luther’s act on October 31, 1517 now includes, in many accounts, the entire history of Western Europe and North America, including the ambiguous ideology of “freedom.” Many “historical” retellings of Luther’s story are designed to bring that out, whether to exalt the hero who launched the modern world or to shake one’s head over the villain who opened the Pandora’s box of modernist wickednesses.

But if “meaning” regularly involves consequences, it also involves *human intentionality*, which attempts to answer the question of “*why* something happened.” Few past events (excepting things such as earthquakes) are like inanimate billiard balls bumping into one another in an undirected chain of causation. Most past events happened because of human intentionality—whether or not those people intended to produce the effects which actually happened, which is frequently not the case. (Even the effects of an earthquake might involve the fact that humans had chosen to build towns in dangerous locations.) A large part of “history” (3b) will therefore involve the study of the *intentionality* of the characters involved. This in turn, as we shall see, involves studying the larger world, and worldview, of their societies and cultures, always alert of course for the possibility of radical innovation or mutation within those worldviews.

Category 3 is most obvious when one talks to actual historians, who claim to be “doing history.” How they operate we will discuss presently.

4. History is a meaningful sequence of events (i.e. 1 above with “meaning” added) and/or a meaningful narration of such events (i.e. 2 above with “meaning” added)

4.a. “History” is a *meaningful sequence of events*, either in the sense that the sequence or the events have meaning in themselves or in the sense that they are “going somewhere,” that there is a “goal,” a *telos*, in view. This is the sense of “history” invoked when people say it’s important to be “on the right side of history,” a popularized and sometimes bizarre version of the views of Hegel, Marx, and others that world events are proceeding in a determined way to a

foreordained goal. Such theories are sometimes known as “historicism,” though that term, and even more so its two German equivalents, are almost as multivalent as “history” itself, so I shall mostly avoid them here.¹³ You don’t have to be a historicist (in this sense) to see history as a meaningful sequence of events; but this determinist kind of “historicism” has sometimes got meaning 4 a bad name. The claim to know “where history was going” was made explicitly on behalf of the new monarchies in Britain near the start of the eighteenth century and the new republic in America near its close: history has turned a corner and we are the future!¹⁴ In fact, ever since people started telling the story of Britain in terms of the Magna Carta, the principle of “increasing liberty” has been a controlling theme, appealed to of course both by Cromwell’s men in the 1640s and by the Restorationists in the 1660s.

This kind of historical interpretation was rampant in the eighteenth century particularly, framing a major clash of narratives. European culture to that point had, at least implicitly, lived off various narratives, including versions of the Christian story in which (a) God was ultimately in control and (b) the story had reached its climax with Jesus and was now being implemented through the church’s life and work. But, as Deism gave way to full-on Epicureanism, both elements had to go.¹⁵ Now (a) the story was controlling itself from within, rather than being directed by God; and (b) it had just reached its climax—in the Enlightenment itself. These, especially the first, brought about the so-called “rise of historical consciousness,” largely due in the English-speaking world to the work of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon. This was emphatically not a delight in the past for its own sake. As in other spheres, if God was out of the picture events must take their own course, must develop under their own steam. Thus the telling of the past, both positive and negative (we think particularly of Gibbon’s debunking of the early church), was part of a larger Epicurean project, worked out in politics, science, and economics as much as in history. The historical movement was a way of claiming control over the past in order to seize control over the present and the future, as in Voltaire and elsewhere.¹⁶ For Hegel, *the events themselves* carried the meaning of “progress.” They were the “history” that beckoned people to join the “right side.”

I will come in a moment to the attempt at meaningful *writing*; the point here is that writers in this period were arguing that *the events themselves* carried the meaning of “progress.” The high water mark of this, producing many streams and rivers of subsequent thought and political action, was Hegel himself. Perhaps it is because this idea originated in Germany that the *OED*, reflecting English writing, does not even mention this sense of the word. But in theology, and I think philosophy as well, and certainly in popular culture, the theme is everywhere apparent. When people say that “history teaches us” this or that, they do not mean that those who write history (sense 2) have cleverly inserted a “moral” into their narration (though that might be true as well), but that the events themselves are

¹³ On “historicism” see chapter three of my forthcoming Gifford Lectures, as well as Mason (2016, 41–43). An important survey is that of Scholtz (1995, 149–167).

¹⁴ The American version is still visible on US banknotes with Jefferson’s ambitious, if ambiguous, retrieval of Virgil’s “Novus Ordo Seclorum,” a “new order of the ages.”

¹⁵ On the Epicurean turn see Greenblatt (2011); Wilson (2008). See also chapter one of my Gifford Lectures.

¹⁶ See Moltmann (1985, 124f., 135).

to be seen as conveying a message, usually about the “progress” by which culture (Western culture? World culture? Society, politics, economics?) is moving inexorably towards a goal, often seen as the fulfilment of some aspects of the Enlightenment dream. (Sometimes, to be sure, the same phrase is used sceptically: “history teaches us that history teaches us nothing.”) This idea is apparent every time somebody says, “Now that we live in the modern world,” or “now that we live in the twenty-first century.” “Meaning,” in other words, is found in the significance of the events within a larger sequence, a movement of culture and society in which the events somehow carry an inbuilt purpose and a definite (though, it seems, frustratingly postponed!) final goal. *A great deal of philosophical and theological writing about “history” seems to have something like meaning 4a in mind.* If, with standard modern Epicureanism, there is no “god” in this picture, then events, on both the large and small scales, must either be completely random and meaningless or they must carry some meaning within themselves. Since theology abhors a vacuum, such “meanings” can easily come to invoke different kinds of divinity (Mammon? Mars? Aphrodite?), though this is usually left implicit.¹⁷

To display all this, of course, writers resort to the next sense, the meaningful *narration* of events. Here, too, the difference between “history as event(s)” and ‘history as writing about event(s)’ continues to cause confusion.

4.b. “History” is a meaningful narration of events. Here the word is used with the same overall intent, but referring more specifically to the actual writing involved (the act of research and writing and/or the written product itself). This is where we meet various analyses, not just of nineteenth-century Hegelian or Marxist writing, but of ancient Hebrew writing on the one hand and early and later Christian writing on the other. (This is hardly surprising, since Hegel and Marx were producing parodies of Jewish and Christian views, pantheist in one case and materialist in the other.) The compilers of the Pentateuch, of Joshua and Judges, of the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, all wrote with a sense that the events of Israel’s past were to be seen as part of a larger, if often perplexing, divine purpose, and that it was their vocation as writers to display the events in such a way as to bring out, or at least hint at, that purpose. Sometimes this was done in a heavy-handed way, as when the Books of Kings draw a simple link between what the kings did and what happened in consequence. Sometimes it was done with a light touch: the writer of 2 Samuel does not say that David’s adultery led to Absalom’s rebellion, but we are invited to infer it. And when the early Christians write the story of Jesus they are clearly saying “let us explain to you that these events are the goal of Israel’s long story and, through their world-changing significance, the launching of a new story upon the world.” Of course, others in the same period wrote teleological “history”: Virgil and Livy are the obvious examples, finding the (for them) unsurprising meaning that Rome’s long history had been but a preparation for the glories of Augustus and his golden age.¹⁸ A complex narrative with teleological meaning.

There are doubtless many other sub-meanings which the word “history” has carried in popular or academic usage. But these are a start. Of course, when people are actually doing history (sense 3), most of these senses may be in play at once. I am not suggesting that these eight meanings denote different or mutually

¹⁷ I have explored this in the final chapter of Wright (2016); and in Wright (2017).

¹⁸ See my discussion of these and similar movements in chapter five of Wright (2013).

exclusive *activities*. My point is that *the way the word is used* slides to and fro between these meanings, and no doubt others as well. That is where confusion easily arises; exactly the kind of confusion, I think, which an “analytic” approach ought to dispel.

Initial Results

This analysis invites four initial comments, about epistemology, ontology, cosmology and authority.

First, sense 1, in which “history” can be used to mean, in effect, “the facts,” sets up the post-Cartesian dichotomy in which the lure of positivism generates its dark side, radical doubt.¹⁹ Hardly any questions of “what happened,” even in modern history, admit of absolute precision, especially when we add, as with 3b above, that historical investigation includes the study of human motivation. Can we really “know”? Lawyers meet this problem all the time, but juries detect or infer *mens rea*, and convict, on the balance of probabilities. A jury steeped in Troeltsch might go on hesitating; but the court—unlike the historian, who can wait for ever!—must reach a verdict. Scientists sometimes pretend to absolute knowledge, but new data regularly requires the re-evaluation of the hypothesis.

In the historical investigation of the Bible and early Christianity there is another element to be considered. Much of the running in detailed investigation of the New Testament was made in Germany between the late eighteenth and the early twentieth century, when the German Enlightenment, with Kant as its patriarch, Hegel as its Moses, and a line of prophets from Goethe to Feuerbach and beyond, was eager to cut traditional Christianity down to size, precisely not to find out “what actually happened” in a neutral fashion but to “discover” *what ought to have happened* if the ideals of the Enlightenment, and with them the great new European culture-project as a whole, were to be valid. Hence *the Cartesian pressure to epistemological caution, if not downright scepticism, was powerfully reinforced by the social, cultural, and theological pressure towards forms of radical Protestantism*.

This epistemological tension is reflected in the vexed phrase “the historical-critical method.” For many in Germany, up to at least the 1960s, the “historical-critical method” was a way of using “historical” tools—source criticism and the like, but also a Troeltschian scepticism—to produce the “results” of a slimmed-down Christianity, indeed a slimmed-down Protestantism, to fit the philosophy and culture of the times. Many in the Anglo-Saxon world, however, not being tuned in to Hegel, Feuerbach, and the rest, have used the phrase “historical-critical” in a more apparently “neutral” sense. Thus C. K. Barrett declared that the great J. B. Lightfoot used only one method in his commentaries, namely “the historical-critical method,” meaning that “[t]he primary and inescapable task of exegesis is to determine the precise meaning of the words in question in the context in which they were first spoken or written” (Barrett 2016, 302). Hearing that, if you said you were *not* following “the historical-critical method” you would be confessing to arbitrary and home-made pseudo-exegesis, and with it historical dishonesty. So when English speakers were told that the Germans, using the

¹⁹ For the entire context see Taylor (2007).

historical-critical method, had produced assured “results,” they heard this within an assumed Anglo-Saxon philosophy tending towards positivism rather than a German one borrowing from Idealism. This has produced a backlash where some, seeing the negative results on offer, have rejected not only the sceptical agenda but the Barrett/Lightfoot method as well. That is the context within which some have discarded historical research entirely, preferring to invoke “history” in the sense of 1a (“everything that happens”) as a kind of outflanking movement: since we know that God is the lord of “history” in this sense, there is nothing more to be said.²⁰

So how, epistemologically speaking, does history “work”? I have proposed elsewhere, following Ben Meyer and Bernard Lonergan, a form of *critical realism*.²¹ That phrase has been contested and controversial; I adopt it in a common-sense heuristic mode: fake news exists, but that doesn’t mean that nothing happened. Historical enquiry must go round the spiral of questioning everything and then telling fresh stories which approach real knowledge by hypothesis and verification. This means that “history” is not, after all, very different from science: you collect all the data, you form a hypothesis, you run experiments to test it, you modify the hypothesis accordingly, and so on. There is overlap: in science, the experiments themselves become past (“historical”) events, open to misrepresentation and manipulation. Yet there is an important difference: science studies the repeatable while history studies the unrepeatable—though we remind ourselves that (a) you can’t repeat an experiment in geology or astronomy, though you can compare observations; and (b) the evidence the historian adduces is in the public domain and others may assess it as well. Many still employ the rhetoric of an older scientism, as though one can say “science has shown” this or that, with a kind of certainty denied to “non-scientific” research; but in fact there is a continuum. Scientific “facts” are frequently called in question by subsequent evidence; and history can, and often does, attain an appropriate measure of (shall we say?) solidity. Nobody except conspiracy theorists doubts that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, or that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. The critically realist task of history (3), producing history (2), really can put us in touch with history (1b), not indeed in a positivistic or “certaintist” way (a hypothetically detached “objectivity” seen from a “neutral” point of view) but through appropriate engagement (the “epistemology of love,” allowing the sources to be themselves), leading not to mere guesswork but to the kind of “knowledge” that real people really rely on in ordinary life.

If the first initial comment thus has to do with epistemology, the second has to do with ontology. Much theologically contextualised discussion both of science and of history has assumed a split between “naturalism” and “supernaturalism” without—in my view!—noticing that this is simply handing a free pass to G. E. Lessing, whose “ugly, broad ditch” separated the contingent truths of history from the necessary truths of reason.²² If we relabel “naturalism” as “Epicureanism”—

²⁰ This is the effect of Rae (2005, e.g. 2, 17, 55, 147, 154f). See further below.

²¹ See part two of Wright (1992), which draws especially on Meyer (1979); see too Meyer (1989). For a recent critique of my work in this area see Porter and Pitts (2015). J. Bernier responds in Bernier (2016), to which Porter and Pitts respond again (2016). This is not the place to engage the debate further.

²² “If no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths. That is: accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason . . . That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often

which is after all what it is—we will see what’s going on. I suspect that the supposed “natural/supernatural” split has come into the discourse about history from its starting-point in the discussion of science and religion (or science and theology?); it was the wrong tool there, and it is worse here.²³ The word “supernatural,” which in the middle ages meant the superabundance of grace over nature (without denying that God was active in nature as well), has been squashed into the dualist Epicurean paradigm, producing an either/or: either one is a “naturalist” in some sense, or one is a “supernaturalist.” Both carry strong implicit evaluation in different communities. And if one is a “supernaturalist” in this decidedly modern sense, then, within the prevailing mood of Deism or Epicureanism, one can avoid the task of history altogether (senses 2 and 3), and look down from the supposed great height of meanings 1 and 4 on those benighted souls who insist on studying historical evidence as though for some reason it matters. The supernaturalist, in this sense, *knows in advance what we ought to find*, and so finds it—astonishingly calling this process “historiography.” All that counts for such a person is to produce some version of 4b: we know what God’s plan was and is, and we allow that to state the terms.

But what if the either/or of the Epicurean worldview was radically mistaken? Supposing we went with some kind of ancient Hebrew or first-century Jewish worldview, in which heaven and earth were supposed, and expected, to overlap and interlock? What if Jesus really was launching God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven, so that *we needed to study earth in order to find out what heaven was up to*, rather than assuming that we knew heaven’s mind in advance: What then? Leaping from 1 to 4 while rejecting 3 and hence 2 as implicit “naturalism” is not history. What’s more, it guarantees bad theology.

From epistemology and ontology to cosmology and, with it, eschatology: will history get where it’s going by “progress” or “irruption”? Hegel believed in dialectical progress; God was, for him, part of that process; so technically he wasn’t a “naturalist.” But there have been many “naturalistic,” or as I would insist Epicurean, versions of this theory. This is basically Jewish Providence-theology with God left out (or, for the pantheist, with God simply as part of the process), just as Marx’s dialectical materialism was Jewish apocalyptic theology with God left out. Reacting to Hegel, we have Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century and Barth (partly channelling Marx and others) in the twentieth, challenging “progress” and the comfortable *Kulturprotestantismus* that saw in modern European culture the gradual arrival of the Kingdom of God. There was actually a groundswell of “end of the world” ideas in the secular culture of the late nineteenth century, with Wagner’s *Ring* cycle—with its message that everything comes crashing down in the end—among its advocates. This spilled over, with dramatic effect, into highly misleading twentieth-century readings of the gospels, a topic on which I have written elsewhere.²⁴ The idea of “history” has itself been caught in the cross-fire of these battles, so that some hear any appeal to “history” as a guilty plea, however unwarranted, to a belief in immanent process, a “closed continuum” of events. The word “history” has thus become muddled up with a particular theory, one variation within the fourth point above, so that to invoke

and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap” Lessing (1956b, 53, 55). Original in Lessing (1956a, 8.12, 14).

²³ See further below.

²⁴ See Wright (2018a, 37–82); and also chapters two and four of my forthcoming Gifford Lectures.

“history” in any way—to announce that one was engaging in “history” as a *task* (3a or 3b) in order to produce a *written account* (2a or more likely 2b) of things that *actually happened* (1b)—was at once to plead guilty to a Hegelian or similar belief in an inexorable teleology (one variety of 4b). The assumed “guilt” in this case comes from the twentieth-century events which have “proved” that Hegel was wrong, seeing that “history” has led only to disaster—a conclusion that, however warranted by actual events, was already assumed by the anti-Hegelians long before the First World War. Barth’s insistence on revelation “vertically from above,” as part of this overall movement, was in fact more about his rejection of Ritschl and Harnack than it was a fresh reading of scripture. Those who hoped for a new world to emerge in the 1930s—I think, for instance, of Walter Benjamin—would then, when disappointed, appeal to Paul Klee’s painting, “The Angel of History,” which looked back on “history” (1a) as nothing but a pile of rubble. That theme has recently been invoked by some who, for quite other reasons, have used the misleading label “apocalyptic” to retrieve an agenda which rejects not only the salvation-historical version of 4b but the task of 3, the project of 2, and the possibility that 1 would ever be helpful for theology.²⁵ These muddles need sorting out.

All this has played out, as is well known, in the badly-formulated debate between that misnamed “apocalyptic” and different varieties of “salvation history.” I have written about this at length elsewhere.²⁶ Genuinely historical study (3a and 3b) of the relevant material produces a narrative (2b) about beliefs that were actually held and that generated actual events (1b), in the light of which we can and should construct a mature, genuinely grounded picture of Jesus and his first followers within their historical and cultural settings. That picture includes the second-temple Jewish sense that history (sense 1) was indeed guided by God, certainly not through a smooth evolutionary progress but through covenantal and creational judgment and renewal seen as the sudden and startling fulfilment of ancient promises.²⁷ This conclusion points forward to some later remarks, both in its *form* (real historical exegesis challenging spurious top-down schemes) and in its *content* (Christian retrieval of second-temple Jewish ideas challenging later western ideologies).

It is vital, then, not to confuse historical investigation of the second-Temple material (“history” (3), producing “history” (2) on the subject of “history” (1b)) with the various schemes we find in 4b. Here there are two equal and opposite mistakes. On the one hand, appealing to “history” does not mean capitulating to a Hegelian version of 4a (postulating an inexorable march of “history” towards some assumed goal). On the other hand, just because as Christian theologians we confess Christ to be the meaning of history (1a) we can never leap from that to a top-down version of 4b while writing off 3 and 2 as though they embody “methodological naturalism.”²⁸ Life is more complicated, and more interesting, than that.

²⁵ One might cite Davis and Harink (2012) and Adams (2015). See too Ziegler (2018).

²⁶ See part two of Wright (2015).

²⁷ See Wright (2018b). See too Davies (2018).

²⁸ Again, this seems to be what M. Rae is proposing in Rae (2005). See, programmatically, p. 2, where he offers “an account of history drawn from the Bible itself in which history is recognized as the space and time given to humankind to be truly itself as the covenant partner of God,” so that “it is within this framework of creation and divine promise that an account is given of what human

All this is to say that a properly historical investigation of the actual second-Temple material (“history” (3), producing “history” (2) on the subject of “history” (1b)) is not to be confused with the various types of scheme we find within 4b. It is in fact a grievous mistake to think that the word “history” necessarily means not only 4b but *one particular position within that*, namely a telling of would-be meaningful “history” *from within a Hegelian standpoint*. To suggest that any attempt to do “history” necessarily means capitulating to this particular strand within 4b would be ridiculous if it were not so serious—the serious element coming in the rejection (in favour of a supposed “apocalyptic” revelation!) of the sensitive and quite un-Hegelian historical consciousness of the early Christians. The move to collapse all of 1, 2 and 3 into 4, while comprehensible (ironically) within a post-Troeltsch scepticism (nothing is certain so let’s just go for the theologically-driven big picture!), belongs within a postmodern relativistic subjectivism which is hardly appropriate. Equally inappropriate is the attempt to suggest that, because a Christian might ultimately want to write a Christian version of 4b (telling the story of the world in such a way as to indicate “what God was doing” at every turn) therefore that is *all* that a Christian historian should do. (It would in any case be an extremely difficult project, though one might envisage some modest and partial versions, in which the word “perhaps” would crop up quite a lot.)

This leads to a brief reflection on authority. The widespread appeal to “the authority of scripture,” as I have shown elsewhere, only attains coherence when seen as shorthand for the authority of God exercised in Jesus and by the Spirit somehow *through* scripture.²⁹ But scripture does not offer a closed, private world, however attractive that looks within a quasi-Barthian post-liberalism. The canonical gospel narratives do what Paul did in his travels: they display the Jesus-story as *public truth*, the truth of events in history (1b) which were reported in coherent historical narratives (2b) by people who had researched, edited, and arranged them (3b) so as to display their view of the meaning (4b) within the events (1b). They gesture at an overall meaning for the whole of history (4a with 1a) *but they insist that this meaning is to be found in the actual events as researched and displayed*, not in an *a priori* which has been produced from elsewhere. Indeed, they insist that one could never start with that overall meaning and deduce the events concerning Jesus. It only works the other way around. God’s decisive saving self-revelation, they say, has taken place *not primarily in their writing* (2b), certainly not *in some larger scheme learned from elsewhere which is simply being played out in these events*, but *in the events themselves to which they bear witness* (1b). That is why history—real history in senses 3 and 2—matters, and cannot be trumped by a grand appeal to a combination of 1 and 4.

History and Jesus

All this leads to some reflections on History and Jesus himself. The implicit moratorium on historical-Jesus work is long gone.³⁰ Controversy still rages at

history is.” This is a kind of outflanking movement, using one meaning of “history” to delete its other normal (and in my view necessary) meanings.

²⁹ See Wright (2011).

³⁰ See chapter one of Wright (1996).

every level, but options are narrowing down. Nobody of course comes to Jesus “neutral”: such claims, for instance from Geza Vermes or Ed Sanders, are falsified both by their published autobiographical remarks and by their very different constructs.³¹ So does everything reduce after all to variations on 4, with historians bringing their own “meaning” and adjusting the evidence to fit? Certainly not. History 3 is a public discipline; the debates continue. The fact that there is no “neutral” point of view doesn’t mean that there is nothing to be seen. Like all genuine knowledge, history 3 involves *both* the full engagement of the interpreter *and* the full allowance that the evidence may suggest things which don’t fit the original assumptions. The more we pay attention to both, the more we find real advance in genuine historical knowledge.

That is why the phrase “historical Jesus” continues to be ambiguous, as we saw earlier. Many, particularly in the implicitly positivistic western world, assume without question that “historical” is to be taken in sense 1: “Jesus as he really was,” “the man from Galilee,” and so forth. As we have noted before, however, the bright light of a positivist ambition has a dark side, namely, the scepticism or even cynicism when “absolute proof” appears lacking. That has fuelled the movement, particularly among those schooled in the tradition that runs from German Idealism to Anglo-Saxon liberalism, to take the phrase “the historical Jesus” in sense 2: “Jesus as the historian reconstructs him,” “our picture of Jesus,” and so on (not least because that’s what the German phrase *der historische Jesus* means)—often with the clear implication that this “reconstruction” is a mere projection, the subjective fantasy of this or that ideology or theology, an agenda-driven version of 4 masquerading as a quasi-positivist 2 but needing to be unmasked because the bright “certainty” is unavailable.

All this has generated a long-running reaction, from Martin Kähler 100 years ago to C. S. Lewis 70 years ago, from Luke Timothy Johnson in recent American scholarship to a good many post-liberals today: please don’t supply us with a “historical Jesus,” because that will only be your attempt to create a fifth gospel, to find a Jesus “behind the text” rather than relying on the Jesus in the gospel texts themselves.³² This is where accusations of “methodological naturalism”—which, as I said earlier, came across from the science-and-faith discussion, and was unhelpful there too—are thrown around, generating more heat than light.³³

Now of course many historians, from Reimarus onwards, have indeed said, “Don’t believe the gospels, believe me instead.” That approach has challenged church tradition in the name of an Epicurean agenda which, as we saw, banished the rumour of God to an inaccessible heaven and tried to make sense of the godless world in its own terms. But there is a big difference between, on the one hand, adopting a Humean *a priori* and offering an alternative to the gospels, and saying,

³¹ Vermes (2011), along with his famous *Jesus the Jew* (Vermes 1973) and many other works; chapter one of Sanders (2016). See too Vermes (1993, 4); Sanders (1985, 333f.) and its discussion in Rae (2005, 90–93). It is a pity Rae did not give more attention to B. F. Meyer (see above n. 24), whose many works hold together, in richly nuanced discussions, the worlds that Rae insists on separating.

³² See Kähler (1892); Lewis (1942, Letter 23); Johnson (1997); several of the essays in Gaventa and Hays (2008). Lewis’s protest comes uncomfortably close to the Bultmann he rejects in Lewis (1967, 152–66).

³³ See Evans (1999, 180–205).

on the other hand, “perhaps the church has forgotten, or not fully understood, what the four gospels were trying to tell us, so let’s dig deeper into them and see.”

This last suggestion is eminently reasonable. Jesus and his first followers lived in the second-temple Jewish world which became increasingly opaque to Christians, and indeed to Jews as well, after the tumultuous events of AD 66–70 and 132–35, and particularly by the fourth and fifth centuries. The recent massive advances in our knowledge of the Jewish world of the first century itself shed copious light on what the gospels (in their different ways) were actually saying. *This does not require the back-projection of a theological construct culled from subsequent Christian thought.* It requires *history*: through the task (3), producing narratives (2) which, like scientific knowledge *mutatis mutandis*, will more and more approximate to the events and motivations themselves (1), resulting in the possibility of fresh proposals at the level of sense 4—proposals which have not been brought *a priori*, but which have emerged through the actual practice, the task, of research and narration (3).

Nor should one be put off from this task by the suggestion that it involves “going behind the text.” That phrase often sounds like a slur, or even a sneer: it implies that we are going behind the writers’ backs, doing something sneaky or underhand. This is ridiculous—though the accusation picks up some unwarranted energy from the postmodern literary mood of questioning whether there can be any real world “outside the text.”³⁴ This mood has coincided with the attempt of Bultmann and his successors to suggest that the stories in the gospels were generated not by historical memory but by self-referential mythmaking in the early church. But when texts have a *prima facie* intent of describing actual events (compare Luke’s prologue, for a start, and his insistence on the accurate dating of John the Baptist),³⁵ doing one’s best to understand what those events were, and what they meant in their context, is not “going behind” them. It is accepting their invitation to explore the world of the past which they intend to open up.³⁶ When the newspaper reports that my team won the match, it invites us to go “behind the text” to ask “so who scored the goals?” Serious musicians can read orchestral scores and “hear” the music in their heads. But to suggest that this is what the score is there for, and to forswear actual performance, would be the height of perversity.

Reading the gospels historically requires, of course, sensitivity to their genre. The work of Richard Burridge and others on the gospels as biography, and the remarkable proposal of Richard Bauckham about eyewitness traditions, have

³⁴ At the time of the original lecture, *First Things* carried an article by Francesca Aran Murphy (Murphy 2017) whose title claimed the opposite: “Everything is Outside the Text.” Judaism and Christianity, she argued, have scriptures which constantly witness to something other than themselves, something “infinitely greater,” namely God’s presence with his people. While the point is well taken, there might be a danger in then forgetting that in both Judaism and Christianity that divine presence has regularly been experienced precisely in and through the reading and study of scripture. It isn’t an either/or, though I would certainly affirm the *primacy* of the extra-textual reality. All this is in implicit dialogue with J. Derrida’s famous “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” which literally means “there is no outside-text,” but which has often been taken to mean that there is no extra-textual reality.

³⁵ See Lk 1.1–4; 3.1–2.

³⁶ Of course, some within the post-Bultmann world were cross with Luke at exactly this point: he, unlike the others, thought these stories were about things that actually happened! (Perrin on Bultmann etc.)

created a new context.³⁷ The gospels purport to be history in sense 2b, referring to history in sense 1b, the result of historical research and selection (3b), pointing strongly to meanings in the area of sense 4. The gospels also contain, of course, sub-genres, such as parables. To ask where the prodigal son lived, or who bought his half of the property, would be to miss the point. But to ask what first-century factors would have generated the hostility to which Jesus' parable is responding is to get the point. The gospels as a whole are not parables whose historical truth is irrelevant to their "point."

The question of hostility to Jesus illustrates all this. The Christian tradition has often assumed that Jewish hostility arose from a "legalism" that was offended by Jesus' offer of love, grace and forgiveness. We now know—and I mean "know"—that this doesn't work historically. It is a hopeless caricature. Jesus was offering a fresh construal of "God's kingdom" in a world where there were other construals on offer, and that meant a social and political challenge, not simply a clash of theologies or soteriologies in the usual sense. History 3 needs to challenge received interpretations, *not to substitute a new construct for the gospels we have but to understand what those gospels were saying in the first place*. This is not to "go behind the text" except in the sense that the texts themselves urge us to do.

What, then, can history do for us? To begin with, it is particularly good at "defeating the defeaters." Every year or so someone writes a blockbuster claiming that Jesus was an Egyptian Freemason, or a Qumran visionary, or that he was married to Mary Magdalene, or whatever—always with the implied corollary, "so therefore traditional Christianity is based on a mistake." These wacky proposals, and the equally wacky though apparently scholarly proposals of groups like the Jesus Seminar, come and go and can be seen off quite easily. One should not judge a discipline by its distortions. But what will see off the sceptics is not a dogmatic reassertion of the tradition, or a ruling out of history 3 with the slur of "naturalism," but the careful and painstaking ongoing work of history itself.

Another example: many have suggested that Jesus and his first followers couldn't have thought of him as "divine" (a) because they were Jewish monotheists and (b) because that would make him insane. But contemporary studies of monotheism, of the Temple as God's dwelling, and of humans as image-bearers in God's Temple, have shown that this was mere ignorance.³⁸ Problems remain, but the old dismissal of Christian claims on the assumption of an original "low" Jewish Christology—and their mirror image in the suggestion that for a proper Christology we have to forget history and look to the Fathers or to Aquinas—have been shown to be out of line, not by an *a priori* culled from later orthodoxy but by historical research (sense 3) into actual historical evidence (sense 1), challenging unwarranted narratives (sense 2) and suggesting the possibility of different meaningful narrations (sense 4). I venture to suggest that this kind of complex "history" is part of obedience to the kingdom itself, coming on earth as in heaven.

All this moves into a different register with the resurrection. Historical study of the sources suggests that, from the very beginning, the events of the first Easter precipitated a radical mutation within the Jewish understanding of history and eschatology, which then formed the interpretative grid: Jesus' rising was

³⁷ See Burridge (2004); Bauckham (2017). There is much to be said about both, and both offer well-grounded ways forward.

³⁸ See Bauckham (2009); Hurtado (2003) and (2005). In my own work, see chapters two and nine of Wright (2013), citing earlier work as well.

interpreted simultaneously as a very strange event within the present world *and* the foundational and paradigmatic event within God's *new* creation.³⁹ This makes sense, albeit new sense, within that Jewish world in which God's space, time, and matter and human space, time, and matter were designed to overlap and interlock. Just as the sceptic cannot appeal to a Humean *a priori*, so the Christian cannot simply say "I believe in the supernatural" as though that bypassed the historical questions. The point about new creation is that it is the renewal of *this* world, not the substitution of another one. Good history, paying attention to the sources and thinking from their point of view, will explain this, and will outflank the normal objections. History—proper history, not an *a priori* appeal—is very good at defeating the defeaters.

But that doesn't mean, "Well, we've got rid of the nonsense, so we can go back to believing what we've always believed." If history can defeat the defeaters, it can also dismantle the distortions, challenging ordinary Christian misconceptions. When we do the history better (like science, we advance towards a hypothetical completeness which we seldom actually reach) we glimpse forgotten dimensions of what the gospels were trying to tell us.

The obvious example is "the kingdom of God" itself. Jesus was perceived as a prophet announcing God's reign. We know plenty about what that meant to his contemporaries, and which scriptural texts they might have associated with it. We know, too, that Jesus appears to have been *redefining* what "kingdom of God" meant, and doing so *around himself and his own strange vocation*. He was not simply describing God's kingdom. He was claiming that in his words and deeds, and then vitally in his forthcoming death, he was bringing it about. We know this as a matter of history (both 3a and 3b), though you'd never get it from the *a priori* which sweeps past on its way from 1a to 4b.

But from at least the third century onwards, much church tradition has not taken seriously either the Jewish context of Jesus' kingdom-proclamation or the content of his redefinition. Most western Christians have assumed that "kingdom of God" meant "kingdom of heaven," and that this meant "going to heaven when you die." This is flat wrong. But if we get it right (sharing Jesus' vision of God's kingdom "on earth as in heaven"), it will revolutionise how we read the gospels, how we understand Jesus, and how we imagine the church relating to Jesus and his story today, not least in eschatology. This historical core (1b) is not simply a matter of clarifying what Jesus was talking about. It is the mandate for the necessary vocation of history itself. Once we allow history on stage to defeat the defeaters we must be prepared for it to dismantle the distortions as well.

Perhaps, indeed, that's why some theologians are frightened of it, and use the caricature of "history" offered by the "Jesus Seminar" and the like as an excuse for dismissing the whole enterprise.⁴⁰ But true history will show, not (as several have suggested) that Christianity is based on a mistake, but that the ways we have perceived and re-expressed it have indeed *introduced* mistakes, precisely by not attending to the historical setting and meaning. Dogma, tradition, and piety all need to submit—as the Reformers would insist, and as even Aquinas might

³⁹ On all this see Wright (2003).

⁴⁰ See Rae (2005, e.g. 19f., 37, 61). One might as well criticize all "systematic theology" by quoting a group of fundamentalist preachers. With one or two notable exceptions (e.g. Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan), the leading American Jesus scholars such as E. P. Sanders, James Charlesworth, J. P. Meier, and others wanted nothing to do with the "seminar."

agree—to the original meaning of scripture itself. And the original meaning (1b) is discerned through historical work (2 and 3—allowing 4 to emerge at its own pace).

If history can defeat the defeaters and dismantle the distortions, it must then also *direct the discussion*. We dare not start somewhere else, even with copper-bottomed orthodox statements like that of Chalcedon, and try to move forwards while ignoring what the early texts were saying. Chalcedon was an attempt to recapture, in fifth-century idiom and for particular purposes, something central in the early texts. But the mode, manner, and content of its retrieval arguably left much to be desired.⁴¹ It screened out several dimensions of the original historical context and meaning (for instance, the first-century significance of the Temple and the Sabbath, both of which created powerful contexts for the earliest Christians' views of space and time), which, had they been retrieved, would have provided a more robust account of Christology and of other themes too. If theology is to be true to itself it must not simply snatch a few biblical texts to decorate an argument mounted on other grounds. It must *grow out of historical exegesis of the text itself*.

This will seem counter-intuitive to those whose experience of academic biblical study has been a dry, lifeless rehearsing of Greek roots and reconstructed sources. That too was always a way of avoiding genuine history, of pretending that digging the soil was the same thing as growing the vegetables. When done properly, historical exegesis (3 and 2) ought to be producing the plants themselves (1) and letting them bear their own fruit (4). But it will only do this if it is allowed to be itself; if history (3a and 3b) is able to do its work without people looking over its shoulder and telling it what it should say and, more particularly, what it shouldn't. Back to the Petrine temptations once more.

My plea therefore, to the larger world of theology, whether “analytic” or otherwise, is not to fear or reject history. You have nothing to lose but your Platonism. Of course, for the last 250 years people have said “history, history” when there was no history, when all they were doing was using Hume and Troeltsch to undermine Christianity. The slippery phrase “historical-critical” has often, as we have seen, given good exegesis a bad name. Theologians who are used to rejecting the would-be historical critique of Reimarus, the liberal anti-dogmatism of Harnack, and the ultra-reductionism of the “Jesus Seminar,” have in effect borrowed Lessing's ugly ditch as a moat to defend their citadel against any historically based critique. But supposing there was an important difference between Christian truth and Lessing's necessary truths of reason? And supposing that historical critique might find itself saying, not that Christianity as we know it was based on a mistake, but that some of Christianity's Great Traditions have slipped their moorings and floated off into the blue sky of speculation? This is in fact what we find. Historical study insists, for instance (as I and others have argued), that many ancient Jews believed in Daniel's extended exile; that Jesus and

⁴¹ See the nuanced judgment of Chadwick (2017, 101–114)—the original text of which can be found in Festugière (1983). See esp. 113: “The technical philosophical terms and the negative adverbs . . . convey a sense of abstraction inadequate to express the richness of a biblical Christology. . . . Abstract terms do not do justice to the vivid figure of the four Gospels, and by their abstraction may seem to take him out of the particularity of the historical process.” This casts doubt, in my mind, on Chadwick's final claim (114) that the Definition is helping the church to hold on to “the two main patterns of Christology inherited from the New Testament itself.”

his followers believed he was inaugurating the real “return from exile”; that this pointed to (what we might call) a this-worldly salvation, a new heaven-and-earth reality, radically different from the Platonic going-to-heaven theology that the western church has taken for granted; and that this contextualises dimensions of Christology and soteriology normally unimagined.⁴²

Reimarus was right, then, to say that the western church needed to be confronted with history; he was wrong to suppose that this would falsify Christianity itself. Rather, it would remind the western church of the core kingdom-message which came true in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and the sending of the Spirit. Harnack was right to say that the third- and fourth-century Fathers changed the shape of the early teaching, but wrong to suppose that the change was from an early “low” Christology or Pneumatology to a later “high” one. The Jesus Seminar were right to say that Jesus had to be studied in his historical context, but laughably wrong in the way they went about that task.⁴³ The challenge of the gospels remains: to hold together the kingdom and the cross, with Jesus inaugurating the first by suffering the second. To embrace a high Christology and forget the kingdom is as bad as insisting on the kingdom and assuming a low Christology: the divinity of Jesus is the key in which the gospel music is set, but it isn’t the tune that is being played. This results in the irony of people invoking “scriptural authority” to support various styles of modern western Christianity, perpetuating Platonic theories which historical exegesis of scripture actually undermines.

Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of God itself, in fact, actually commits us to the task of history: to “history” in sense 3, that is, the research and careful reconstruction of what Jesus did and what he meant by it (in sense 1), and what his first followers understood at the time and came to understand shortly afterwards as they wrote the start of history (2). The *task* of history (3) will then be to produce further *coherent narratives about the past* (2b—the ambition for 2a must of course be reined in) through which the reader will gain a better insight into *what actually happened* (1b) and *what it meant to the key players at the time*. And with the latter move we are in the realm of (4), not to collapse the project into subjectivism or to relativize 3 and 2, but to display the full historical picture and allow the theology to emerge from it.

Method and Meaning: the Task of the Historian

So what is Christian historiography all about? For the Christian historian, the task involves a kind of kenosis (in the true biblical sense, not the spurious construal that sometimes uses that name). The Christian historian is not called upon to abandon belief in divine sovereignty or providence, as is sometimes imagined by those who fear “methodological naturalism.” Belief in divine sovereignty does not tell me, in advance of historical research, *what it is that has happened in the real world over which I believe God is sovereign*. As soon as someone says “because God is sovereign, because Jesus is Lord, such-and-such *must have happened*”—or alternatively “*cannot have happened*”—I know I am listening to nonsense. One

⁴² See the discussions in Scott (2017), especially the contributions of E. Radner and H. Boersma.

⁴³ See chapter three of Wright (1996), and the other literature cited there.

cannot do history “from above.” The historian has to plunge into the real world, to follow the Jesus of Philippians 2 into the messy and risky sphere of history itself (sense 1!) in order to find out *what it is in fact that God has sovereignly done* (a thoroughly theological version of sense 4). We do not know this in advance. The first disciples didn’t know it in advance. “No-one has ever seen God,” declares John, “but the only-begotten God has unveiled him” (John 1:18). Not to approach the task this way is to reject the God of John’s gospel, and of Philippians 2. It is not enough to say “yes, yes, we believe in ‘history,’” meaning simply the bare acknowledgement that Jesus really existed, that God incarnate walked the earth. *We don’t know who God incarnate is until we look at the incarnate God.* And that means “history” in senses 3 and 2 as well as 1. Without that, our reconstructions of meaning (sense 4) will be circular, self-serving, and missiologically futile. We will construct a comfortable house with no front door.

This doesn’t mean that the Christian historian can never stand back and attempt a larger faith-perspective, whether on global history as a whole (good luck with that one!) or on a particular person or period. That, in a small way, is what I’ve tried to do in this lecture, in sketching some of the roots of our shared disciplines. But we must beware of imagining that we can produce a new kind of salvation-history, reading divine intention and action off the all-too-ambiguous pages of even the best history. Just because we believe in divine providence we cannot copy the inspired writers of scripture and leap straight to a God’s-eye view of events.⁴⁴ Hegel saw history as inexorable progress; we beg to differ. Martin Luther saw the mediaeval period as the Babylonian Captivity of the church: well, perhaps. But perhaps not. As with the depths and ambiguities in our own lives, divine order is seldom perceived all at once, and that is probably just as well. Even St. Paul, musing on the meaning of Onesimus’s conversion, used that word “perhaps” to introduce his suggested interpretation.⁴⁵ Back to humility, patience, penitence, and love.

And so back to Jesus. He remains central to theology, which means that theology needs history—in all four senses. We dare not embrace methodological Docetism (a Jesus who looks historical but isn’t really). We must not, for fear of modernist prejudice, invoke something called “the supernatural” to “explain” everything, or suppose that the only thing the historian should do is to write one’s own version of the four gospels, bringing out the “divine significance” at every turn. That would merely perpetuate Lessing’s false either/or, and would fail at the hermeneutic of love in which we allow the past to be itself, instead collapsing the ways in which (some) first-century people thought into the ways that (some) post-Enlightenment people have thought. Historical study of the early Jewish and Christian world thus itself sets the hermeneutical parameters for the task: as we study that period, we discover people who did not suppose the world to be divided

⁴⁴ As appears to be proposed by Rae (2005): “a true account of history will relate the involvement of God in the successive unfolding of events” (49), “an alternative conception of what history is, a conception drawn from the Bible itself” (62f.). The problem is that what Rae is proposing—a “prophetic” task, displaying world events from God’s point of view—has almost nothing to do with the normal meanings of “history.” Faced with the historical garden growing weeds, he is determinedly paving it over with theological concrete, and calling this “history” instead. Fortunately, real history, like the weeds, will grow back, but the cracked concrete will get in the way of the real gardening that ought then to be attempted.

⁴⁵ Phm. 15.

into nature and supernature, detached from one another. Their understandings of reality were Temple-shaped: heaven and earth overlapped and interlocked. Sometimes, to be sure, things happened which made them say, “God has visited his people!”⁴⁶ More often than not their response was dismay and puzzlement, particularly when Jesus went to his cruel death.⁴⁷ Many looked and looked, as they still look and look, and never saw. Quite so. The fact that one cannot (as is often said) “prove the divinity of Jesus” by history alone is part of the point: we don’t even know what “divinity” is until we discover who Jesus himself was—as all four gospels insist. We cannot simply declare Jesus to be “divine” on the basis (say) of his resurrection (resurrection by itself would not make that point) and then, assuming we know what “divine” means, proceed from there while ignoring what the gospels actually say. That, I think, is what has often happened, and it has invited the protests from Reimarus to the “Jesus Seminar” and beyond. Rather, when we look both *at* and *through* the story of Jesus and see there the unexpected and shocking signs of the presence of Israel’s God, doing at last what he had promised—then we are compelled not to skip over the historical detail but precisely to plunge right into it. And that is when we discover what “divinity” might actually mean, not because we would be looking through spectacles manufactured in later centuries, nor because we would be abstracting, from Jesus’ life and work, selections of deeds and words that would illustrate later abstract theological formulations.⁴⁸ Then and only then we would see, as those later Patristic spectacles might screen out, the kingdom-vocation which was the point of it all, the task to which and for which the incarnate Son gave his life.

I propose, therefore, that to study first-century history (3, leading to 2, aiming at 1, opening up possibilities of 4), with Jesus and his first followers in the middle of it, is a necessary part of healthy Christian life, theology, and witness. History alone cannot form the foundation for an old-fashioned rationalist apologetic. A true apologetic includes the larger “history” which is the Spirit-filled life of the church, the story-telling and symbol-making through which new creation brings healing to the present world and points on to God’s ultimate heaven-and-earth future. On the way, “history” in all senses is vital: to defeat the defeaters, to disturb and dismantle the distortions, and to direct the discussion into wiser and healthier paths.

The task of history is not unlike the task of Elijah, rebuilding the altar of YHWH which had fallen into disrepair.⁴⁹ The priests of Baal—the self-appointed leaders of secular western culture—have had their say, have produced their parodies, have danced around the altar singing songs of progress and/or revolution, and still the kingdom has not come. Many of the faithful YHWH-scribes have been hiding in caves, safe in their private worlds. It is time for the historians to take up the stones that speak of the ancient past, and with them to build a new altar, laying upon it the offering of our labours. It will, of course, be surrounded by an ugly, broad ditch, full of water. It may look impossible for the sacrifice ever to catch fire. That is not our business. Our job—the task of the analytic and exegetical theologian—is to build the altar, the public truth which emerges from responsible and careful historical work, showcasing as best we can the meanings which make

⁴⁶ Lk. 7.16; see too 1.68; 19.44.

⁴⁷ Lk. 24.21: “we were hoping that he was going to redeem Israel!”

⁴⁸ See now Hays (2017).

⁴⁹ 1 Kgs. 18.19–46.

sense—deep and rich first-century sense—in their context. Then, and only then, we pray for the fire to fall.

Bibliography

- Adams, Samuel V. 2015. *The Reality of God and Historical Method: Apocalyptic Theology in Conversation with N. T. Wright*. InterVarsity Press.
- Barrett, C. K. 2016. "J. B. Lightfoot as Biblical Commentator." In J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistles of 2 Corinthians and 1 Peter*, edited by B. W. Witherington and T. D. Still. InterVarsity Press.
- Bauckham, Richard. 2009. *Jesus and the God of Israel*. Eerdmans.
- _____. 2017. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Eerdmans.
- Bernier, Jonathan. 2016. "A Response to Porter and Pitts' 'Wright's Critical Realism in Context.'" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14: 186-193.
- Briggs, Asa. 2011. *Secret Days: Code-Breaking in Bletchley Park*. Frontline Books.
- Burke, Peter. 2018. *What is History Really About? Reflections On Theory and Practice*. Edward Everett Root Publishers.
- Burridge, Richard. 2004. *What are the Gospels? A Companion with Graeco-Roman Biography*. Eerdmans.
- Butler, Joseph. 1736. *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*.
- Carr, E. H. 1961. *What is History?* Cambridge University Press.
- Chadwick, Henry. 2017. "The Chalcedonian Definition." In *Henry Chadwick: Selected Writings*, edited by William G. Rusch. Eerdmans.
- Davies, J. P. 2018. *Paul Among the Apocalypses? An Evaluation of the Apocalyptic Paul in the Context of Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature*. T & T Clark.
- Davis, J. B. and D. Harink. 2012. *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn*. Cascade Books.
- Evans, C. Stephen. 1999. "Methodological Naturalism in Historical Biblical Scholarship." In *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God*, edited by Carey C. Newman. InterVarsity Press.
- Festugière, A.-J., trans. 1983. *Actes du Concile de Chalcedoine: Sessions III–VI*. Patrick Cramer.

- Gardner, Helen, ed. 1972. *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*. Oxford University Press.
- Gaventa, Beverly Roberts and Richard B. Hays, eds. 2008. *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*. Eerdmans.
- Goslee, Nancy. 1974. "In Englands green & pleasant Land': The Building of Vision in Blake's Stanzas from 'Milton'" *Studies in Romanticism* 13: 105-125.
- Green, Joel. 2007. "History, Historiography." In Vol. 2 of *New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by Katherine Doob Sakenfeld. Abingdon Press.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2011. *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*. Norton & Co.
- Hays, Richard B. 2017. *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*. Baylor University Press.
- Hurtado, L. W. 2003. *Lord Jesus Christ*. Eerdmans.
- _____. 2005. *How on Earth did Jesus become a God?* Eerdmans.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. 1997. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. HarperCollins.
- Kähler, Martin. 1892. *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus*. Deichert.
- Kotkin, Stephen. 2017. "When Stalin Faced Hitler: Who Fooled Whom?" *Foreign Affairs* 96 (6): 48-71.
- Lessing, G. E. 1956a. *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by P. Rilla. Aufbau-Verlag.
- _____. 1956b. "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power" in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, translated and edited by H. Chadwick. Stanford University Press.
- Lewis, C. S. 1942. *The Screwtape Letters*. Bles Publishing.
- _____. 1964. *The Discarded Image*. Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 1967. "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism." In *Christian Reflections*, edited by W. Hooper. Bles Publishing.
- Mason, Steve. 2016. *Orientation to the History of Roman Judaea*. Cascade Books.
- Menon, Anand. 2017. Book Reviews. *Foreign Affairs* 96 (6): 122-126.
- Meyer, Ben F. 1979. *The Aims of Jesus*. SCM.
- _____. 1989. *Critical Realism and the New Testament*. Pickwick Publications.

- Moltmann, Jurgen. 1985. *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. SCM Press.
- Murphy, Francesca Aran. 2017. "Everything is Outside the Text." *First Things*. Published Online: November 2, 2017. Accessed: November 11, 2018. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/11/everything-is-outside-the-text>.
- Naiman, Susan. 2002. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
- Porter, Stanley E. and Andrew W. Pitts. 2015. "Critical Realism in Context: N. T. Wright's Historical Method and Analytic Epistemology." *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 13: 276-306.
- _____. 2016. "Has Jonathan Bernier Rescued Critical Realism?" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14: 241-247.
- Rae, Murray. 2005. *History and Hermeneutics*. T & T Clark.
- Sanders, E. P. 1985. *Jesus and Judaism*. SCM.
- _____. 2016. *Comparing Judaism and Christianity: Common Judaism, Paul, and the Inner and Outer in Ancient Religion*. Fortress.
- Scholtz, Gunter. 1995. "The Notion of Historicism and 19th Century Theology," in *Biblical Studies and the Shifting of Paradigms, 1850-1914*, edited by H. Graf Reventlow and W. R. Farmer. Bloomsbury.
- Scott, James, ed. 2017. *Exile: A Conversation with N. T. Wright*. InterVarsity Press.
- Stern, Fritz, ed. 1973. *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*. Vintage Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press.
- Vermes, Geza. 1973. *Jesus the Jew*. Collins.
- _____. 1993. *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*. SCM.
- _____. 2011. *Providential Accidents: An Autobiography*. SCM.
- Von Ranke, Leopold. 1885. *Sämtliche Werke* 33/34. Duncker und Humbolt.
- Wilson, Catherine. 2008. *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*. Oxford University Press.
- Wright, N.T. 1992. *The New Testament and the People of God*. SPCK.

- _____. 1996. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. SPCK.
- _____. 2003. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. SPCK.
- _____. 2004. *Evil and the Justice of God*. SPCK.
- _____. 2011. *Scripture and the Authority of God*. SPCK.
- _____. 2013. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. SPCK.
- _____. 2015. *Paul and his Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates*. Fortress Press.
- _____. 2016. *The Day the Revolution Began*. SPCK.
- _____. 2017. *Spiritual and Religious*. SPCK.
- _____. 2018a. "Hope Deferred? Against the Dogma of Delay." *Early Christianity* 9 (1): 37–82.
- _____. 2018b. "Apocalyptic and the Sudden Fulfilment of Divine Promise." In *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination*, edited by J. K. Goodrich, B. Blackwell and J. Mastin.