POSSIBILITY AND IDENTITY
RICOEUR AND FREI ON THE RESURRECTION

Sam Houston, Boston College

Of those who have written on matters of philosophical and theological hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei standout as, perhaps, two of the most antithetically minded individuals. That this is true might be attributable to the fact that, in many ways, they are quite similar. Both attribute a great deal to a proper understanding of narrative in adequately grasping the meaning of the Bible. Both emphasize the importance of attending to the literary forms of scripture. Each is made uneasy by historical-critical methods which make a one-to-one correlation between meaning and historical reference as well as the attempt to derive meaning from the biblical text by means of hermeneutical theories which reduce the text simply to abstract philosophical ideas. Consequently, both can be seen as mediators who try to find a middle way between these two extremes. However, the way in which this middle passage is construed differs significantly, depending on whose methodology you are talking about. Ricoeur mediates between these two positions by recourse to phenomenological hermeneutics while Frei looks to a kind of Anselmian theological-literary approach. Each method greatly influences their respective views of scripture, especially the resurrection narratives portrayed in the Gospels.

In this paper, I will explore both Ricoeur and Frei's view of the resurrection, arguing that it is Frei's approach which succeeds in most sufficiently

understanding the nature of this event in a way that is commensurate with the character of the biblical text itself. Respecting the integrity of the text is something which both Ricoeur and Frei hope to accomplish; nevertheless, only Frei truly achieves this goal. I will begin with Ricoeur, relaying a brief word about his hermeneutical philosophy. Although I intend to focus my attention Ricoeur's view of the resurrection, such an explication is vital to achieving full understanding of the significant presuppositional differences between Ricoeur and Frei. After providing an account of Ricoeur's interpretation of the resurrection, I will then bring Frei's critique of his position to bear, demonstrating the ways in which Ricoeur fails to take the integrity of scripture satisfactorily into account. Finally, I will present Frei's own view on the resurrection, arguing that his approach does, in fact, respect the integrity of the biblical text.

RICOEUR, POSSIBILITY, AND MEDIATING THEOLOGY

Ricoeur understands the biblical narratives as a species of religious language.[1] Religious language, then, is a form of poetic discourse. In it, the human imagination is at work, creating new forms of response to God's actions upon us. For Ricoeur, the truth claims made by religious texts are more like those of the poet than of the historian or scientist. In discussing the different ways in which artistic and religious language is used, Ricoeur wants to call upon another form of discourse which has been neglected by modern philosophy and linguistics, that of the *text*.[2] The text deserves a place alongside the more familiar units of *word* and *sentence* (or *name* and *proposition*). So, analytical attention should be paid not simply to words and sentences which are abstracted from their sources, but the manner in which they are textually presented also must be examined. Each text inherently possesses the qualities of both meaning and reference. For instance, the meaning of a narrative text would be its plot while the reference might be the possible world it creates. For Ricoeur, meaning and reference cannot be separated for the intelligibility of each term depends on the presence of its partner; however, they are not to be thought of as strictly identical either.

Furthermore, all three levels of discourse (word, sentence, and text) are always intertwined.[3] In one sense, this is obvious because sentences are made up of words, and texts of sentences. However, Ricoeur claims, it is also true that words always imply (hidden) sentences, and sentences always

---

[1] Gary Comstock, "Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative," *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), 131.

[2] Ibid., 132.

[3] Ibid., 134.

imply (hidden) texts. That is, if words and sentences are abstracted from their textual environment, then their meanings are legion. All levels of discourse must be employed if one hopes to sufficiently derive (true) meaning, including that of textuality. We must begin to take seriously things like plot and character, theme and suspense, mood and setting. What is important for our purposes is Ricoeur's discovery of the level of the narrative text which provides a way to accurately detect claims about the truth of biblical narrative.[4] Religious narratives attempt to uncover the largest "text" of human temporality. They are offered as fundamental stories within which all of our speaking and doing is revealed in its ultimate significance. This ultimate significance is discovered only once the imagination has been transformed to grasp new possibilities: "it is in imagination that the new being if first formed in me…the power of letting oneself be grasped by new possibilities precedes the power of deciding and choosing."[5] The world of the Bible opens up the reality of the possible, and to the extent that a possibility illumines my existence, it can be said to be revealed.

However, this is also true of all religious texts. At the level of textuality, there is nothing special about the Bible. As far as its literary forms are concerned, it is just like any other text. Ricoeur affirms the fact that all religious (poetic) texts, whether sacred or secular, have the potential to reveal human speaking and doing in its final significance. Therefore, theological hermeneutics is a particular case of a general hermeneutic and at the same time a unique case. It is unique in that it explores certain dimensions of the biblical text such as a new covenant, a new birth, and the Kingdom of God, aspects which are not found in any other text. Nonetheless, it appears that the principles of understanding are the same for non-biblical texts as well. Other texts function in a revelatory fashion, opening up new worlds of possibility. As a result of such an approach, Ricoeur has not shown us that theological hermeneutics is significantly different from his philosophical hermeneutics.[6] Theological hermeneutics, in the end, serves as a methodology which unfolds the implications of the world of the biblical text, not a special method for understanding scripture.

Now that a tenuous grasp of Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy has been achieved, we can move on to discuss his understanding of the specific biblical narratives found in the Gospels. Once this has been done, then a

---

[4] Ibid., 135.

[5] Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics," *Studies in Religion* 5 (1975-6), 33.

[6] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 155.

proper foundation will have been laid to adequately grasp Ricoeur's interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It should be noted that Ricoeur concerns himself more with the life and teachings of Jesus rather than with the crucifixion and resurrection. He tends to view the passion and resurrection as consequences of the life Christ chose to lead rather than as an integral part of his purpose in this world, much less as any sort of God-human reconciliation. Jesus' parables disclose the religious or sacred dimensions of human life.[7] They manifest the extraordinary in the ordinary. In them, the sacred is disclosed in the secular. This sacred is not the sacred of cosmic symbols but the sacred of human limit-experiences. In these limit-experiences, one discovers that she is not alone, that she is surrounded by the transcendent. The word (textuality) helps to produce these limit-experiences and as a result, new possible worlds are created.

The world of the text, however, is not the story world, but a secondary world that manifests significant human possibilities and ways of orienting oneself in life. A parabolic metaphor, in the strangeness of its plot, institutes a shock which redescribes reality, and reveals a new way of seeing and being. In doing so, it opens up a "world in front of the text" which may be inhabited by the reader.[8] This metaphorical nature of the Gospels creates the ground necessary for the discovery of this secondary world.[9] They metaphorically refer to the divine (the extraordinary) in human existence (the ordinary). As such, for Ricoeur, the Gospels manifest a secondary world, a way of being-in-the-world. The referent is the Kingdom of God as it qualifies human experience and demonstrates the existence of innovative capacities and fundamental characteristics of humankind. It is in the rendering of this secondary world, this world of possibilities, that the Gospels find their true meaning.

Although Ricoeur focuses his hermeneutical energies on the parabolic material in the Gospels, he does have a significant place in his schema for the resurrection. However, a proper understanding of the resurrection can only be gleaned when it is seen against the backdrop of his account of evil. For Ricoeur, humankind is possibility, but a possibility within limits.[10] He refuses to identify these limits, or finitude, with evil. He believes that the most a philosophical description of essential human being can reach is the concept of finitude and fallibility, but not evil. So then the challenge becomes how to

---

[7] Ibid., 170.
[8] Lewis S. Mudge, "Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation," *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. and intro. Lewis S. Mudge, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 26.
[9] Vanhoozer, 171.
[10] Ibid., 241.

incorporate radical evil into one's thinking while at the same time preserving hope. In order to meet this challenge, Ricoeur shifted from phenomenology to hermeneutics, that is, to a form of thinking about evil not in terms of human potential but in terms of concrete existence as expressed in language and literature.[11] Because one cannot deduce radical evil or hope from a conceptual system, it is necessary to look to narratives for understanding. In order to grasp the nature of evil and the possibilities for its overcoming, Ricoeur looks to the vision of the world provided by the biblical narratives of Adam, Job, and Jesus.

Ricoeur begins by refuting a long accepted interpretation of the Adamic myth which leads to a moral or ethical vision of the world.[12] According to the ethical vision, God is both lawgiver and judge who rewards and punishes. The moral vision of the world seeks to explain evil in terms of the misuse of freedom. This ethical reading leads to a number of conclusions such as the autonomy of the human subject, the appearance of God more as a lawgiver than a God of love, and the destruction of hope because God's favor has to be won through moral obedience rather than received in spite of disobedience.[13] A literal reading of the Adamic myth leads to the ethical vision of the world. Ricoeur claims that the wisdom literature of the Old Testament itself calls this interpretation into question with its meditations on the suffering of the innocent in such places as Job. For Ricoeur the whole point of Job is to falsify the ethical vision of the world. Job penetrates beyond the God of morality to a kind of faith that is defined by mystery.

A figure which further transforms the ethical vision of the world is the Suffering Servant. Whereas evil is portrayed in the story of Adam as just retribution and in that of Job as unearned, the story of the Suffering Servant transcends both of these notions by depicting evil as redemptive: "Only a third figure could announce the transcending of contradiction, and that would be the figure of the 'Suffering Servant,' who would make of suffering, of the evil that is undergone, an *action* capable of redeeming the evil that is committed."[14] The Suffering Servant shows that another possibility for suffering exists besides that of the ethical (Adam) or the tragic (Job). This third vision presents a view which includes the conception of God taking suffering up into the divine life and experiencing it fully. Once a literal reading has been left behind, then such interpretations are possible which

---

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 242.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 324.

give rise to this eschatological vision: "I am convinced that the full acceptance of the non-historical character of the myth—non-historical if we take history in the sense it has for the critical method—is the other side of the great discovery: the discovery of the *symbolic* function of the myth."[15] In looking to myth as symbolic rather than historical, one can discover in the parabolic metaphor a secondary world of new possibility which the Suffering Servant presents. This symbolic interpretation of myth of the Suffering Servant provides a clue to Ricoeur's understanding of the resurrection.

Ricoeur eschews views of the resurrection which place its meaning temporally in the past (Hegel) or the present (Bultmann). The resurrection, rather, is to be interpreted in terms of hope, in terms of the future. Ricoeur praises Jürgen Moltmann's eschatological interpretation of Christ's resurrection which employs hope as one of its central driving mechanisms.[16] Thus, the resurrection should be interpreted within a theology of promise for it gives us reason to look forward beyond the pain and meaninglessness of our lives: "The Resurrection is the sign that the promise is henceforth for all; the meaning of the Resurrection is in its future, the death of death, the resurrection of all from the dead. The God who is witnessed to is not, therefore, the God who is but the God who is coming. The 'already' of his Resurrection orients the 'not yet' of the final recapitulation."[17] The resurrection's meaning resides in the fact that, just as death and meaninglessness did not have the last word over Christ, so too, death and meaninglessness do not have the last word over humankind.

From this hope, a certain kind of freedom is engendered. Ricoeur refers to this as "freedom in the light of hope." Freedom in the light of hope is the meaning one receives when living in the light of the resurrection. Christian freedom, which belongs to the order of the resurrection, possesses two aspects, "in spite of" and "how much more." The "in spite of" is a "freedom from," but in the light of hope; "how much more" is "freedom for," equally in light of the hope. The resurrection gains its power from the fact that nothing defeats it, not even death itself. In spite of all odds, it is victorious. So, in spite of the indications that death and the absurd will overcome all in this life, humankind is to believe that these will not, in fact, reign in the eschaton. This is to be believed because resurrection prevailed over the cross: "If the connection between the Cross and the Resurrection is the order of paradox and not of logical mediation, freedom in the light of hope is

---

[15] Ibid., 235-236.
[16] Paul Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. and intro. Lewis S. Mudge, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 158.
[17] Ibid., 159.

not only freedom for the possible but, more fundamentally still, freedom for the denial of death, freedom to decipher the signs of the Resurrection under the contrary appearance of death."[18] Belief in the resurrection demonstrates that a new world is always possible, despite signs otherwise. As such, it is also a freedom of "how much more." The "how much more" is just the reverse, the positive side, of the "in spite of." This joyous freedom "feels itself, knows itself, wills to conspire with the aspiration of the whole of creation for redemption."[19] This logic of excess which the resurrection provides is expressed in an "economy of superabundance" which must be discovered in daily life, in work and leisure, in politics and universal history.[20] For this reason, freedom in the hope of resurrection has a personal expression, certainly, but, even more, a communal, historical, and political expression in the dimension of the hope of universal resurrection.

In Ricoeur's reading of the Gospel narratives, the point of the stories about Jesus is to demonstrate that human goodness and freedom are more fundamental to existence then death or meaninglessness. The resurrection functions as a promise which provides the foundation for Christian freedom, a way of being-in-the-world in spite of unjust suffering by discerning the promise of the God who is coming. In other words, Christ has shown the promise of possibility. But, what about the question of historical reference? While certainly privileging the poetic and religious, Ricoeur seeks to save the historical through recourse to the category of "testimony." This type of testimony, though, has more to do with existential verification than eyewitness substantiation. The truth of certain poetic possibility is determined by its ability to illumine and transform life. For Ricoeur, the category of "testimony" makes possible the claim that the experience and the idea of the absolute can be coupled together.[21] The exteriority of acts and existence and the interiority of primary affirmation can, in fact, be so conjoined that they give testimony to the absolute. In this instance, testimony "is the action itself as it attests outside of himself, to the interior man, to his conviction, to his faith."[22]

Consequently, testimony is not primarily the oral report of an eyewitness about a fact which she observed, such as one might find in Luke-Acts. One does not gain true self-understanding by studying objects in this world.

---

[18] Ibid., 164.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. and intro. Lewis S. Mudge, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 119.
[22] Ibid., 130.

Rather, it finds a more fundamental meaning in the fourth Gospel. Here, testimony clearly shifts from a narrational perspective weighing heavily on empirical data to a more confessional stance wherein the attestation provided is one which includes existential commitment. In this context, "the *exegesis* of God and the *testimony* of the Son are the same thing."[23] Ricoeur is careful, however, to make a special effort to make sure that testimony retains a quasi-empirical dimension. He writes: "It is not possible to testify *for* a meaning without testifying *that* something has happened which signifies this meaning."[24] There is a tension between word and event, between fact and meaning which Ricoeur wants to maintain. There must be a first event which takes place in the spatio-temporal dimension that creates the necessary ground for the emergence of meaning. The event, however, fades away and only the meaning endures. The way to grasping this meaning which eludes historical-critical methods then is through existential verification. In attempting to decipher the value of a statement of testimony, one should ask whether this testimony not only expresses but occasions new experiences of the absolute. When confronted with true testimony about the absolute, one cannot help but confess that here is the source of truth and meaning. Moreover, the true witness is capable of suffering and dying for the sake of that testimony. Christ's passion and resurrection then becomes, for Ricoeur, the paradigm for every witness. His life attests to the fact that testifying to the truth entails suffering. One is able to accept the historical factuality of these events because Jesus' testimony has transformed humankind forever by demonstrating the possibility that suffering, death, and meaninglessness do not have the last say. But Ricoeur even has a difficult time admitting this: "Have we then to say, about the Resurrection, that something happened, but that we have only the trace of the event in testimonies, which are already interpretations? … But to give to such elusive events the equally elusive status of the Kantian *Ding an sich* is a price that nobody wants to pay after Fichte's and Hegel's critique of the *Ding an sich*."[25] It appears that Ricoeur is unwilling to view the resurrection as a "literal" event in the sense that certain historical events serve as its truth conditions. In the end, the resurrection's elusiveness proves that it is inaccessible both to empirical examination as well as conceptual understanding.

In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Hans Frei comments critically on what can be taken to be Ricoeur's approach to the Bible. In this text, Frei argues that, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the literal sense of the biblical

---

[23] Ibid., 137.
[24] Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," 133.
[25] Paul Ricoeur, "Reply to Lewis S. Mudge," *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. and intro. Lewis S. Mudge, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 45.

narrative began to be distinguished from questions of historical reference or religious truth—questions that eventually rose to the forefront of theological discussion. As a result, the meaning of the biblical narrative came to be conceived ostensively either in terms historical or ideal reference. Frei associates Ricoeur with those who took ideal reference to be the biblical text's meaning, using the term "mediating theology" to designate this position. Mediating theology sees the stories of Jesus' miracles not as literal, but as figurative expressions of the uniqueness of Jesus' being or consciousness. What counts is the religious truth content, not the narrative form. Thus, mediating theologians require an antecedent conceptual framework within which to read the biblical narratives if they are going to be meaningful. For Frei, this results in an interpretation which is "a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story."[26] The most significant change during the nineteenth century according to Frei was the focus on the question of meaningfulness rather than on the rules and principles for interpreting texts. For this reason, Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* constitutes a massive protest against the whole enterprise of philosophical hermeneutics where the literary dimensions of all texts are subsumed under one *a priori* conceptual system.

For Frei, the purpose of exegesis, and likewise theology, is to explain the logic of biblical thought rather than transposing it into philosophical conceptuality. That is, the task of the theologian is not to translate the language of the Bible into a language that will be relevant to the human situation; rather, it is to redescribe biblical language. This requires the firm belief that scripture means what it says and as such, there is no need to translate it.[27] In this way, Frei follows Anselm and Barth who both hold that theology and exegesis are to seek to understand Christian beliefs and practices on terms commensurate with its own peculiar brand of rationality. An Anselmian methodology makes no *a priori* demands concerning the kind of meaning the Gospel narratives may have. According to Frei, Ricoeur's project is far from being Anselmian. Ricoeur employs, not *ad hoc* rules for interpreting the biblical narratives, but a full-fledged, systematic theory of understanding. Ricoeur's belief that the literal sense of religio-poetic texts must be abolished in order to free the second order meaning seems to Frei to do injustice to the integrity of the nature of the biblical text. As we have seen above, for Ricoeur, at the level of written discourse, there is nothing special

---

[26] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 130.
[27] Hans W. Frei, "On Interpreting the Christian Story," 1976, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School, New Haven.

about the Bible. Its literary forms are found in all kinds of poetic literature, both sacred and secular. The world of the poetic text which reveals new constellations of transformative meaning and possibility is the object of hermeneutics. As a poetic text, the Bible opens up the realm of the possible, and to the extent that these possibilities illumine essential aspects of the human condition, they can be said to be revealed. Consequently, Ricoeur's theological hermeneutics function as a particular instantiation of his general hermeneutics which can be applied to any poetic text. As such, Ricoeur fails to adequately acknowledge the literal sense of the Gospel stories.

Such an approach, Frei notes, has consequences for a literal reading of the Gospels. The literal sense means that the story is about a fictional or historical man named Jesus whose identification is provided by narrative descriptions which gain their force by being ascribed to him and no one else. In contrast, Ricoeur's approach entails a view of Jesus as a scriptive subject chiefly in the form of consciousness.[28] In this understanding, Jesus is not in the first place an agent of his actions nor the executor of the project for which he has come into this world to accomplish; rather, he is an individual who manifests a certain way of being-in-the-world and as such, his actions play a logically derivative role. Frei wonders, on the general hermeneutical level, how this approach's claim to inclusiveness should be taken when it subverts all interpretations which hold to a "descriptive discourse" rather than a "creative metaphoric discourse."[29] If this is the case, then the Christian tradition of literal reading, which has resisted this reduction of the subject of the narrative to consciousness, will have to be abandoned. Additionally, any kind of literal ascription of meaning to a personal subject becomes highly tenuous in such a hermeneutic where the meaning is constituted, not in the narrative, but by the interpreter.[30] What the biblical narratives present is not, in the first place, conscious subjects who are the agents of their own actions which thus determine their meaning, but rather a "mode of being-in-the-world" which the subjects exemplify in their behavior and which then is disclosed to the "understanding." Consequently, one might wonder to what extent Jesus or even the biblical narratives are needed. Those who hold to this position, however, want to claim the unsurpassability of the Gospel narratives' reference to Jesus so that Christ's particularity may be upheld and not made obsolete by a later and fuller revelation of meaning. They also want to maintain that this revealed knowledge made possible by

---

[28] Hans W. Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 46.
[29] Ibid., 47.
[30] Ibid.

Jesus' presence on this earth is available elsewhere. Frei believes that such a position cannot bear the weight of this tension in any consistent manner. In the end, when this hermeneutic is applied to the Gospel narratives, the result is that the literal reading not only stretches, it breaks down as well.

Frei, engaging in a sort of *ad hoc* apologetic, also brings a Deconstructionist critique to bear on Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy. He notes that, often, language is tripped up in its own metaphorical character precisely at the point where philosophical theorists claim to have discovered a close relation between metaphor and technical concept or true meaning.[31] One instance of such metaphorical usage can be found in the phrase "the 'referent' basically manifests the meaning 'in front' of the text." This metaphor invokes spatial dimensions as it is contrasted with a reading that takes place "behind" the text. The "referent" in front of the text is that restorative "sense" of the reading which grants access to the secondary world, for which the text and reader come to share a common referential world which they cannot share in the critical reading of the meaning "behind" the text. In the one case, the spatial metaphor (meaning "behind" the text) is intended to indicate the mutual absence between semantic sense, real referent, and the reader's world. By contrast, the other spatial metaphor (meaning "in front" of the text) is supposed to indicate the overcoming of this distance without a complete conflation of the three aspects listed above. To someone like Derrida, it is clear that even if one spatial metaphor (meaning "behind" the text) successfully indicates the absence between semantic sense, real referent, and the reader's world, the other metaphor's meaning (meaning "in front" of the text) is derived from simply being placed in opposition to the first metaphor.[32] Rather than achieving a successful conceptual pairing, it simply plays off the fact that the prepositional phrase "in front" opposes the other preposition, "behind." While the signifier of the first metaphor ("behind") has a clear conceptual signified pairing, the same cannot be said of the second metaphor ("in front"). There is no clear signified concept to accompany the signifier that is the second metaphor. The second metaphor's meaning (signified) is derived, not from an independent source, but from the first metaphor (signifier) itself. Ricoeur just replaces one metaphor with another.

Frei succeeds in demonstrating that Ricoeur's project fails in interpreting the biblical narratives on their own terms, and that such faulty interpretations lead to a misconstrual of the meaning of the resurrection. Frei also reveals the fact that, in bringing a complex and extensive theoretical system to bear

---

[31] Ibid., 56.
[32] Ibid.

on the biblical text, Ricoeur ends up attempting to find a place for the biblical world in his own ideational creation rather than locating a place for his conceptual reality within the world explicated by scripture. This has drastic effects for a literal reading of the biblical narratives. Moreover, the large and dense conceptual apparatus which Ricoeur has constructed has problems of its own. Frei seeks to read the biblical text in a way less encumbered by theory and more firmly rooted in the context of a Christian community with its rules for faithful reading.

FREI, LITERAL SENSE, AND THE IDENTITY OF JESUS CHRIST

Frei believes that a literal reading of the Gospels more closely approximates what historically has been the traditional way in which the Christian community has chosen to read the Bible. There certainly have been other options available, such as allegory, but the literal reading has been the most predominant. Such an approach holds that Gospel stories and even large portions of the Old Testament narrative are "realistic," but that the issue of their making factual truth claims is not part of the scope of hermeneutical inquiry.[33] "Meaning," in this view, is logically distinct from "truth," even where the two possess significant similarities such as with the categories, "history-like" and "historical." The question of truth found in the Bible, Frei claims, is separate from that of its meaning. Frei appeals first to a genus of text called "literary" and then to a distinct species, "realistic narrative," in order to adequately understand the biblical narratives. In realistic narratives, "meaning is in large part a function of the interaction of characters and circumstances."[34] The meaning, rather than being discovered in the interaction between the text and the reader, is found in the dynamic interaction between characters, actions, and circumstances. Accordingly, there cannot be meaning without this narrative form. There would be no point to the story without the narration itself. As such there is an inseparable relationship between narrative form and meaning content:

> this meaning through instantiation is not *illustrated* (as though it were an intellectually presubsisting or preconceived archetype or ideal essence) but *constituted* through the mutual, specific determination of agents, speech, social context, and circumstances that form the indispensable narrative web.[35]

---

[33] Ibid., 62.
[34] Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 280.
[35] Ibid.

A reading of realistic narrative that respects this close identification of narrative form and meaning will not disassociate the subject matter or referent from the story itself. Much of what makes this approach successful in providing a reading which is in line with historic Christian interpretation is its conviction that the text truly possesses its own integrity and can speak for itself. The Christian community has understood this ability of the text to speak for itself to be a gift of the Holy Spirit who guides right interpretation of the Bible. For this reason, Frei looks to the *sensus literalis* as that which best guarantees an approach to the biblical text which respects its voice. The *sensus literalis* maintains that it is scripture which governs and bends to its own ends whatever general categories it shares with other kinds of reading. It is a case-specific reading which may or may not find analogues elsewhere. Furthermore, it is not only case-specific but as such belongs first and foremost to the context of the Christian sociolinguistic community. Consequently, the task becomes for the exegete (or theologian) one of mere description rather than explanation.[36] And here we can begin to see quite clearly the contours of Frei's Anselmian literary-theological approach. This Anselmian perspective is one that seeks to respect the literal sense which does not seek meaning "behind," "above," or "in front" of the text, but rather locates that meaning in the world created by the text. There is no separate subject matter apart from the story itself. As an Anselmian, Frei believes that the task of the theologian-exegete is to explicate the meaning of the story.[37] This is not simply a literary exercise, however, for interpreting this narrative entails theological consequences as well. The most important theological consequence is that the Gospel narratives render the identity of Jesus Christ.

Frei claims that the identity of Jesus Christ is most clearly presented in the passion-resurrection narratives.[38] It is in this final sequence rather than through Christ's sayings that his identity is most evidently rendered. The specific content of Christ's teachings is not enough to make him sufficiently accessible. Frei takes this as self-evident because he believes that it is in Christ's actions that his identity is most manifest: "it is perfectly proper to describe *what* a person is by what he *does*, and *who* he is by what he is and does."[39] It is in the Christ's interaction with other characters and

---

[36] Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition," 67.

[37] Vanhoozer, 162.

[38] Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 176.

[39] Hans W. Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 18.

circumstances that we learn who he truly is. Moreover, in locating the meaning in the Gospel story's narrative portrayal, one discovers that the true focus of the biblical narratives is Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. The meaning does not reside in the historical accuracy or the mode of being-in-the-world expressed in the Gospels, but rather in the fact that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh who has come to reconcile the world to God. Frei notes how those who stress the historical or mythical aspects of the passion-resurrection narrative have a faulty, one-sided understanding of identity. Rather, they should look to a literary approach which takes seriously what the text says.[40]

So, then what does this mean for belief in the resurrection? It means that to grasp the true identity of Jesus Christ is to believe that, in fact, he has been raised from the dead.[41] For Frei, the question of factuality is bound to come up precisely at the point where Christ's individuality is most sharply asserted. This point is the resurrection. Thus, the passion-resurrection account forces the question of factuality. In the Gospel accounts, the authors are claiming that the being and identity of Jesus in the resurrection is such that his nonresurrection is inconceivable.[42] One could presumably still see the resurrection as a literary feature, and therefore either leave the question of facticity unanswered or else answer it negatively, but one cannot deny that the accounts themselves answer the fact question in the affirmative.[43] While belief in the resurrection may more nearly be a belief in the inspired quality of the accounts, there comes a point where "a judgment of faith concerning the inspiration of the descriptive contents and a judgment of faith affirming their central factual claim would have to coincide for the believer. He would have to affirm that the New Testament authors were right in insisting that it is more nearly correct to think of Jesus as factually raised, bodily if you will, than not to think of him in this manner."[44]

What relationship, then, does this factual belief have to historical reference? What role does historical evidence, biblical or extra biblical, play in one coming to grasp the true nature of Christ's identity? Frei states that while faith in the resurrection cannot be articulated except by way of the resurrection narratives, they are not the sufficient condition of the faith that Jesus himself is the subject of the resurrection.[45] However, historical

---

[40] Ibid., 32.

[41] Ibid., 41.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 180.

[44] Ibid., 182.

[45] Hans W. Frei, "Of the Resurrection of Christ," *Theology and Narrative*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 204.

evidence cannot accomplish this task either. There appears to be no independent historical or other evidence that lends conclusive support to the likelihood that this event took place: "It is not likely that successive generations of critics will agree on what is probable fact in the Gospel accounts."[46] Even if there were consensus one way or another, to what historical or natural occurrence would one be able to compare the resurrection? The resurrection is a historical "fact" like no other. One simply cannot employ historical-critical tools, tools used to investigate historical events governed by the natural chain of cause and effect, in order to grasp the reality of the Son of God's resurrection. Moreover, the language and categories of "reference," "fact," and "probability" are not as value-neutral as they may seem.[47] Rather than being innate structures of the mind, they carry cultural conceptual presuppositions. There was a time when the church did not employ these categories and a time most likely will come when they will be discarded. Frei does admit, though, that historical evidence could be used to disprove Christ's resurrection for if this event truly did not occur, then it is like any other purported fact that has been proven false.[48]

In contrast to Ricoeur, who claims that the meaning of the resurrection is eschatological, Frei affirms that, as a result of the resurrection, Christ's presence can be known by the church now. As a function of the Holy Spirit and through the Word and Sacrament, Jesus Christ may be declared to be temporally and spatially present.[49] This presence results from the comprehension of Jesus Christ's identity for the understanding of Christ's identity entails the conviction that he is present to the church. This presence, though, is indirect. In other words, the church affirms the presence of Christ in an analogical manner because it does not know how to imagine or conceive of such a presence literally. However, belief in this temporal and spatial presence persuades one to claim that God is present in Jesus who is present to the church now.[50] Such a belief is made possible by a literal reading of the Gospel stories as realistic narratives. In employing this hermeneutic, Frei seeks to be true to the distinctive character of the Bible. He succeeds in this endeavor because he recognizes the integrity of the biblical text and thus does not attempt to fit it into an *a priori* theological or

---

[46] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* 175,

[47] Hans W. Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Proposal,'" *Theology and Narrative*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 211.

[48] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 183.

[49] Ibid., 187.

[50] Ibid., 194.

philosophical schema. Rather, he allows the biblical text to dictate the conceptual categories which he brings to bear in the explication of its content. His recognition of the importance of reading the Bible within the context of its religious sociolinguistic community enables him to respect this unique textual identity. In doing so, Frei can be said to be a literary-theological Anselmian.