

John J. Johnson

Hans Frei as Unlikely Apologist for the Historicity of the Resurrection

Mr Johnson is a postgraduate student at Baylor University; his earlier article, 'Is Cornelius Van Til's Apologetic Method Christian, or Merely Theistic?', appeared in this journal in July 2003 (EQ 75:3, pp. 257-68).

Key words: Apologetics; conservatives; Hans Frei; historical; liberals; miracles; myth; narrative theology; resurrection; unsubstitutable one

Describing the late Hans Frei as an apologist for any aspect of Christianity, not to mention the resurrection, may strike many readers as rather incongruous. After all, in his magnum opus, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei often seemed exasperated with scholars who had gone beyond the narrative of the biblical texts to find a 'historical' foundation upon which to ground apologetic endeavors.¹ In fact, one of his former students has written that Frei was 'concerned almost to the point of obsession with making it clear that he is not doing apologetics.'² However, in his *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, as well as in various essays, Frei makes a case for the historicity of the resurrection that I believe can only be classified as apologetic. In this essay, I hope to provide several reasons why this is so. Additionally, I will examine weak points in Frei's thesis, and suggest how it could be improved to provide a much more rigorous defense of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as an historical event.

I. Strengths of Frei's View Concerning the Resurrection

Hans Frei's tenure as Christian apologist began with his insistence

1 Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). Frei was equally critical of both apologists and biblical critics who employed the historical-critical method, because each was overly concerned with the alleged historical events that lay behind the texts. His description of the state of biblical scholarship in the eighteenth century is typical of his critique of all periods in the post-critical era: 'neither religious apologists nor historical critics were finally able to take proper and serious account of the narrative feature of the biblical stories' (136).

2 William C. Placher, 'Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Some Preliminary Questions', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 5 Spring (1978), 37.

that the Christian community, that is, the faith community, is the forum in which the Christian scriptures should be interpreted. The idea that the Christian story *qua* narrative should be the provenance of the believing Christian community can be traced back to H. Richard Niebuhr's essay 'The Story of Our Lives'. From this modest beginning grew the modern narrative theology movement as we know it today.³ Frei can be seen as one of the first non-'fundamentalist' theologians in the twentieth century to realize that the Christian scriptures are properly interpreted by the *believing* Christian community. Frei was reacting against the Enlightenment agenda that reduced the Bible to merely a document for analytical scrutiny by critically-minded Christians, non-Christians, etc.⁴

Frei's position here is quite important, and I believe it further supports my contention that he was attempting to ground the Christian proclamation on an apologetic foundation, even if that foundation was inward-looking, rather than an attempt to appeal to non-Christians: 'Frei has said in effect that the christological assertion of the community of faith must control the method of interpretation by which Scripture is read.' Rather than allowing 'higher' criticism or literary theory to dictate the terms by which the Christian Bible must be read, Frei assigned interpretive authority 'to what the Christian community affirms about Jesus Christ. In this way the authority of Scripture in theological discourse is maintained, but that authority does not depend on a general literary theory.'⁵ In a sense, Frei returned ownership of the New Testament to those whose task it was to interpret it before the 'eclipse of biblical narrative' occurred; he returned the Christians' scriptures to the Christian community, the only group that can interpret them as they were written to be interpreted: as *story*, not as a collection of isolated pericopes, different levels of literary strata that have been skillfully woven together by a redactor, etc. Frei, of course, was no fundamentalist who derided the tools of the historical-critical method, but he knew that the essence of the Christian faith was being obscured by this cold, analytic technique that robbed the Christian stories of their 'story-ness'. Because the rendering of the uniqueness of the identity of Christ was not simply a bi-product of the gospels but rather their very essence, 'the sacrifice of story or narrative impinges on the authority of Scripture as

3 David K. Clark, 'Narrative Theology and Apologetics', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 36/4 (December 1993), 499.

4 John Sykes, 'Narrative Accounts of Biblical Authority: The Need for a Doctrine of Revelation', *Modern Theology* 5/4 (July 1989), 327.

5 *Ibid.*, 329.

well as the question of the unique identity of Jesus.⁶

Before Frei offered his defense of the resurrection, he established the historical reality of the person of Jesus Christ. Against those who would consign the passion/resurrection accounts to the realm of the non-historical, Frei says the following:

We should ask, then, if the Gospel account of the resurrection can be understood to be a myth. . . . the resurrection account (or, better, the passion-resurrection account as an unbroken unity) is a demythologization of the dying-rising savior myth. For, in contrast to the substance of myth, the passion-resurrection account concerns an unsubstitutable individual whose mysterious identity is not ineffably behind the story but is inseparable from the unsubstitutable events constituting it, with the resurrection as its climax.⁷

The passion/resurrection narratives cannot be myth, for they owe their entire existence to a concrete person: 'The Gospel story is a demythologization of the savior myth because the savior figure in the Gospel story is fully identified with Jesus of Nazareth. The early Christians would substitute no other name.'⁸ Two things should be noted here. First, Frei sounds very much like C.S. Lewis at his most apologetic, who also saw the Christ event as a 'demythologization of the dying-rising savior myth'. For Lewis, Christ represented 'myth made fact', that is, in Christ we have the reality to which dying/rising god stories were merely a preparation:

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens* – at a particular date, in a particular place; followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified.⁹

Second, Frei challenged the Bultmannian type of denial of the physical, literal resurrection of Christ. The historicity of the resurrection has taken somewhat of a beating in the last several decades; many scholars have been so reluctant to declare the resurrection a historical fact that they have sought refuge in the realm of a 'history beyond history'. That is, they maintain that the resurrection indeed

6 James Patrick Callahan, 'The Convergence of Narrative and Christology: Hans W. Frei and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (Dec. 1995), 541.

7 Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 139 – 140.

8 *Ibid.*, 59.

9 C.S. Lewis, 'Myth Became Fact', in *God in the Dock* ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 66 – 67.

happened, but not in the realm of observable, verifiable history. Of course, this is merely theological double-talk; there is no such realm, at least not that we know of. Past events either happened, or they did not. Indeed, the phrase 'historical event' cannot even be understood apart from the idea that something actually occurred in space-time history. But, even if such a meta-historical realm does indeed exist, why would it be any easier for God to perform miracles there than in our own historical realm? If God cannot work miracles (e.g., if he cannot raise Jesus from the dead), then he cannot work miracles, regardless of the 'world' in which he operates! Rudolf Bultmann was one of the most famous advocates of this supra-historical view of the resurrection. For Bultmann, 'God is beyond space-time history. His acts are transcendent; they are above observable human history. . . . Miracles are not of this world. They are acts in the spiritual world. In brief, Bultmann has defined them out of existence.'¹⁰ But appeal to a make-believe realm of supra-history does nothing to settle the matter one way or another. Indeed, from an apologetic viewpoint, this retreat into the non-historical realm seems to be a tacit admission that the resurrection need not be taken too seriously, since it seems to be like so many other religious stories—purely mythical, regardless of the effect it may have had on the disciples.¹¹ Evangelical distaste for such a view is captured in the following words from Gregory Boyd and Paul Eddy: 'A good deal of liberal theology is premised on the mistaken notion that people can embrace the symbolic meaning of an event while denying the event ever literally took place. . . . Evangelicals have always regarded this line of thinking implausible, if not incoherent.'¹²

For Frei, the stories about Jesus, especially the story of the resurrection, cannot be relegated to the realm of the non-historical precisely because Jesus is what Frei terms an 'unsubstitutable' person. In other words, the stories about Christ are inconceivable unless the person at their center (i.e., Jesus), actually had the experiences that

10 Norman L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 90. For a good, succinct summary of Bultmann's views on the historical (or non-historical) character of the New Testament, see Carl Michalson, 'Rudolf Bultmann', in *Ten Makers of Modern Protestant Theology* (ed. George L. Hunt: New York: Association Press, 1958), 102—13.

11 Although Bultmann thought that it was possible for the resurrection to be a non-physical, non-objective event in history, the 'event' of the resurrection nonetheless sparked the rise of the kerygma in the apostles. For his skepticism regarding the historicity of the gospel accounts, see his *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* trans. J. Marsh (1921; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

12 Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 71.

the gospels record him as having. And it is in his resurrection that Frei says Christ is most 'unsubstitutable'. Frei writes that 'What the accounts are saying, in effect, is that the being and identity of Jesus in the resurrection are such that his nonresurrection becomes inconceivable.'¹³

Frei is not at his most lucid here, but the gist of his argument seems to be that, if the gospel writers, indeed the Christian community, are going to talk of Jesus Christ, it is necessary that he must be viewed as the Resurrected One, for this is who Christians claim him to be. To talk of a non-resurrected Christ might be to talk about an actual human being who lived in first-century Palestine, but this person bears no resemblance to the Lord Christians believe has conquered the chains of death. An analogy may prove helpful here. When we think of Hamlet, we necessarily think of a *mad* Hamlet. A sane Hamlet simply would not be Hamlet at all. When it comes to Jesus, we could easily think of him as hailing from a town other than Nazareth, since his birthplace is not fundamental to our understanding of his nature and mission. 'To think of Jesus is to think of one who *is*, who is not dead but alive, not absent but with us always, to the very end of the age.'¹⁴ In fact, a case can be made that in Frei's understanding of the resurrection, we have a very philosophically sophisticated apologetic argument. Indeed, it is nothing less than 'a kind of Ontological Argument: the concept "Jesus" analytically contains the idea of existence with us now, so Jesus *cannot be thought of as not present*.'¹⁵

If this is correct, Frei seems to have placed himself (as far as the issue of the resurrection is concerned) at least partially within the theological camp of no less an apologist than St. Anselm himself!

Rudolf Bultmann once remarked that, even if Christ's bones were to be discovered tomorrow in a cave in Israel, it would not negatively impact the Christian faith and kerygma. Of course, St. Paul had quite a different view of this matter. In 1 Corinthians 15: 12 – 19, he clearly teaches that if Christ was not raised in bodily form, the Christian faith is a sham, and 'we are to be pitied more than all men' (v19). Paul knew full well that the Christian faith was based upon objective evidence, and he appealed to it often in his letters. Frei, though obviously not the thorough evidentialist that Paul was, still realized that the resurrection of Christ is the central event in the Christian faith, and to talk of a non-resurrected Jesus is akin to saying nothing at all of the founder of Christianity.

13 Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 145.

14 Mike Higton, 'Frei's Christology and Lindbeck's Cultural-Linguistic Theory', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50, no 1 (1997); 89.

15 *Ibid.*, 89.

II. Problems with Frei's View of the Resurrection

So far, we have seen that Frei does two important things regarding the resurrection. First, he has given the authority for interpreting this event to the community of believing Christians. Second, it is their inability to conceive of him as not risen that renders ridiculous all talk of a non-resurrected Christ. Such a procedure surely can strengthen the faith of those within the church, but what about those outside the church? Does a resurrected Jesus who is only thought to have been resurrected by his own community carry any weight with those outside of the community? Frei is quite unwilling to say that there is any evidence for Christ's resurrection, aside from the 'ontological argument' described above.¹⁶ Consider what he says in the following passage, regarding the possibility of making the transition from the truth of the resurrection narratives, to actual historical truth: 'explaining how this transition becomes possible – to say nothing of demonstrating its actual occurrence – is what we claimed from the beginning to be impossible, certainly in the context of our analysis of the unity of Christ's presence and identity, if indeed at all.'¹⁷ Or again, he states that there is 'no argument from factual evidence or rational possibility to smooth the transition from literary to faith judgment. But this is really not surprising, for faith is not based on factual evidence or inherent historical likelihood.'¹⁸

What is odd about the above statement is that the *narratives themselves* in the New Testament are used to undergird the historicity of Christ's resurrection from the dead in bodily form. For the New Testament writers, the resurrection of Christ was an objective event in time-space history that verified the claims of the new faith the disciples were preaching. In Acts 17:31, Paul, who is debating with the Athenians, explicitly states that there is objective evidence for his religion, since God 'has given *proof* of this to all men by raising [Jesus] from the dead.' The same apologetic technique is on display in Acts 26, when Paul appears before Festus and Agrippa. Here again, Paul is arguing the Christian case based on the evidence provided by the resurrection. Indeed, so central is the reality of the resurrection for Paul that he plainly says the Christian faith stands or falls based on

16 Although, in Frei's defense, it has been pointed out that 'Frei is implying at least negative historical claims (the disciples did not steal the body; Jesus did not merely faint on the cross; it is not enough to say that his memory was wondrously preserved in the minds of his disciples, etc.).' Quoted from Placher, 'Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Some Preliminary Questions', 40.

17 Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 147.

18 *Ibid.*, 151.

the veracity of this event (1 Corinthians 15: 12–19).

Thus it can be said that the New Testament, contra Frei, is strongly evidentialist in its approach to the faith. Yes, it teaches that the Christian life is one based on faith, but it is a faith based upon historically verifiable events. These events can be summed up as follows. First, the tomb of Christ was empty. Had he not risen, hostile Roman and Jewish authorities could have easily produced the body, thus squelching any talk of a risen Messiah. Such talk would have been blasphemy to the Jewish religious leaders, and potentially seditious as far as the Romans were concerned. The idea that the disciples stole and hid the body, then later claimed that Christ was resurrected, is ludicrous. The disciples suffered greatly for the gospel that they preached. They certainly gained no worldly benefits from preaching their message. Ultimately, tradition tells us, most of them died as martyrs. It is highly unlikely that twelve men would suffer and die for a religion they knew to be based on a lie. Second, the resurrection must have actually occurred, for it is these appearances which obviously turned a rag-tag group of Jewish peasants into the mighty evangelists who began to preach the resurrection and divinity of Christ. How else to explain the fact that these simple men, who were so dejected when their Master was executed, suddenly became witnesses unto death for that same Master? That these resurrection appearances were only visions, or hallucinations, is entirely untenable, for no twelve men (not to mention the five-hundred persons that Paul mentions!) can be expected to have the same hallucinations!¹⁹ Even orthodox Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide is compelled to assert:

No vision or hallucination is sufficient to explain such a revolutionary

19 For a treatment of the problems inherent in the idea that several persons can experience the same hallucination or vision, see my 'Were the Resurrection Appearances Hallucinations? Some Psychiatric and Psychological Considerations', *Churchman* Autumn 2001 (227 – 238), where I show that the clinical evidence for this position is severely lacking. I also point out serious problems with the idea that the resurrection appearances can be attributed to mass hysteria on the part of the disciples. Documented cases of mass hysteria differ greatly from the reports of the risen Christ we find in the New Testament. But some critics take a different approach regarding the appearances and claim that these reports can be dismissed because visions of deceased persons are fairly common among those who have recently suffered the loss of a loved one. However, as N.T. Wright has pointed out, people who 'see' departed loved ones realize that what they are seeing is only a 'vision', or a 'ghost.' Such visions never convince the seer that the loved one has been 'resurrected.' Thus we often hear such seers saying things like, 'my *dead* father appeared to me last night', or 'I saw the spirit of my dearly *departed* mother last night.' Only in the case of Jesus do his post-mortem appearances convince people that he is still alive (Dr. Wright made these telling comments during a lecture at Truett Seminary, Baylor University, October 2002).

transformation [in the disciples]. For a sect or school or an order, perhaps a single vision would have been sufficient—but not for a world religion which was able to conquer the Occident thanks to the Easter faith.²⁰

Third, the story of the resurrection was preached in the presence of 'hostile witnesses', that is, Jewish authorities who would have gladly discredited the story had they been able to do so.²¹

Now, such evidence does not, of course, prove beyond a doubt that the resurrection happened. Still, for Frei to not even have *addressed* it is strange indeed. Had he faced it, and then offered a plausible refutation of it, his position would be far stronger. In the one place where he does seem to address this type of evidential argument for the resurrection, he seems to suggest that those who think the resurrection has good evidence in its favor are fundamentalists, who

believe that the New Testament accounts are an absolutely accurate record of the things that actually happened when Jesus was raised from the dead. They take accounts such as those of the empty tomb [and] the resurrection appearances of Jesus in the Gospels, and Paul's account of the resurrections appearances (1 Cor. 15:3-8) to contain no contradictions among themselves and to constitute reliable evidence in favor of an earthly event, Jesus' resurrection.²²

But this is nothing more than an argument aimed at a straw-man. Very few scholarly apologetic treatments of the evidence for the resurrection claim that the gospels are a word-for-word description of what actually happened. Also, the fact that there are discrepancies between the gospel writers' resurrection appearance accounts are granted by most conservative scholars, because the issue at hand is the appearances themselves, rather than whether or not all four evangelists tell exactly the same story.²³

Of course, those who in the past have tried to refute the good evidence in favor of the historicity of the resurrection have often fared poorly. Even so illustrious an atheist as Antony Flew badly stumbled

20 Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (trans. Wilhelm C. Linss; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 49. As an Orthodox Jew, Lapide does not view Christ as the Jewish Messiah. However, he does believe that his resurrection proves that he is God's messiah to the *Gentile* world.

21 For a fine treatment of this type of approach, see John Warwick Montgomery, *Where is History Going?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1969), 53—74.

22 Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 202.

23 See, for example, Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), and *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). In fairness to Frei, both books were published after his works were written.

when he attempted to debate evangelical Gary Habermas on the resurrection.²⁴ And atheistic philosopher Kai Nielson, when pressed by his opponent J.P. Moreland to address the many evidences Moreland had laid out in favor of the resurrection, replied, 'I don't know much about such things and to be perfectly frank, I'm not terribly interested in them.' He then goes on to explain why, even if Christ was indeed raised bodily from the tomb, it would only constitute a peculiar fact we cannot explain because we lack the scientific resources to do so.²⁵ Of course, if Christians are claiming that 'such things' are one of the main reasons (the other being that faith is a gift of God through the Holy Spirit) people have faith in Christ to begin with, it is odd that an opponent would not do his or her best to demolish those things. To ignore them is to not seriously engage the issue at hand, and this is, unfortunately, what Dr. Frei was guilty of.

But even if Frei was opposed to the traditional evidence that has been advanced to bolster confidence in the resurrection, it is truly shocking that he did not apply his own narrative technique to the *post*-resurrection stories about Christ that are preserved in the New Testament. Frei took great trouble to point out that in the passion/resurrection stories, we have the surest proof that Jesus must have died and risen, because a dying/rising savior is what all Christians take Jesus to be; he cannot be understood apart from this. Well and good. But if the narratives in the gospels that portray Christ as dying and returning to life are so normative for Frei, then what about the narratives in the Book of Acts? Why are not these narratives treated with the same seriousness as those we find in the gospels? In fact, in Frei's writing on the resurrection, we find him almost exclusively concentrating on the passion/resurrection narratives in the gospels, but paying very little heed to what is found in the rest of the New Testament. Granted, he is focused on narrative, and once we move beyond the gospels, there is little narrative to be had; Paul's works are all epistolary, as is most of the New Testament.

But it cannot be denied that Acts is just as thoroughly a narrative work as the gospels. In fact, Frei even seems to have recognized this at one point in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, where he stated that Paul, on the Road to Damascus, heard the voice of Jesus. This heavenly voice, Frei admits, represents 'the claim that the presence of Jesus

24 The debate can be found in *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* (ed. Terry L. Miethe; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). For a similar debate, see the exchange between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan, in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (ed. Paul Copan; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

25 Kai Nielson, *Does God Exist: The Debate Between Theists and Atheists* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), 66.

after his death is fully identical with who he was and what he did in the flesh before his death. He is none other than Jesus of Nazareth. His presence is self-focused and not diffused.²⁶

Now, Paul heard this voice, and he realized who it was; it belonged to the one he had been persecuting, the one whose followers claimed had been resurrected. When the voice of the speaker identifies himself as 'Jesus whom you persecute, (Acts 9:5)', Paul seems to have instantly understood who this Jesus was. This Jesus could only be the 'unsubstitutable' one who was said to be alive by his followers. Yet Frei insisted there is no evidence of the resurrection beyond the accounts in the gospels. But if he is willing to lend credence to the gospel accounts, why not to Paul's conversion experience? After all, in order for Paul to hear the voice of a man who had been executed (not to mention Paul's blinding by Christ's supernatural presence), he had to presuppose that Jesus had been resurrected. This meant that Paul met the 'unsubstitutable' one; the one whom he encountered had to be Jesus, for only Jesus has risen from the dead.

Furthermore, what about the other narrative episodes in the Book of Acts? Acts simply would not be possible had it not been for the events recorded in the gospels. In other words, the entire Acts of the Apostles is predicted upon the resurrection of Christ as described in the gospels. Just as it is impossible for Christians to think of Jesus as not raised from the dead, so it is impossible to understand, say, Peter's speech in Acts; why would he claim that God had raised Jesus from the dead (4:10)? Because Peter knew that Christ had indeed been raised. In fact, all of Acts makes little sense if the resurrection was not a reality for the Christians who began to spread the new faith. For when they preached in the name of Christ, they preached about someone for whom it was impossible to say was anything less than the resurrected one.

III. Is Frei's Understanding of Narrative 'Historical'?

As explained above, Hans Frei seems to offer the Christian a good reason for believing that Christ rose from the dead (i.e., his unsubstitutability). Granted, the resurrection makes sense to the Christian, but would not the same hold true for a Muslim's view of Muhammad? That is, are not Muslims justified in thinking of Muhammad as God's last and greatest prophet, since for Muslims to think about Muhammad is to necessarily think of him in this 'unsubstitutable' manner? Does Jesus as the resurrected, unsubstitutable one mean the event

26 Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 49.

happened in time-space history? In an article critical of Frei, evangelical theologian Carl F. Henry sums up the dilemma for theologians who stress the narrative nature of scripture to the exclusion of any ostensive referent in actual history. I quote him at length:

Representations of biblical history by many narrative theologians leave one with the uneasy sense that their commendable reservations about the historical method are correlated with a view that important aspects of biblical history belong to a different historical category than the history that contemporary historians investigate. Biblical history indeed bulks large in redemptive acts, that is, in special deeds in which God is active for human salvation. But insofar as such acts are held to be historical, must they not fall into the same category of history that legitimately concerns contemporary historical investigation?²⁷

Henry's point here is, of course, that Christian faith, at least as the New Testament writers understood it, is based on the resurrection as an actual, space-time event. Indeed, the 'NT itself affirms that historical disconfirmation of the resurrection would undermine the Christian faith.'²⁸ The question is, did Frei conceive of the resurrection as something that happened in history, or is it merely a compelling story for those in the Christian community? Frei is notoriously hard to pin down on this issue; he never really tells us where the line between biblical narrative and 'real' history starts (or ends?). It is as if Frei was so intent upon stressing the importance of reading the Bible narratively that he forgot that the biblical writers thought of themselves as writing true history.

Frei was certainly aware that the question of the resurrection's historicity is an important one. And when pressed on the issue, he said the following: 'The New Testament authors, especially Luke and Paul, 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.'²⁹ This is about as close to an affirmation of the historical nature of Christ's resurrection as one is likely to find in Frei's writings. And although this statement would probably not satisfy Henry, it certainly places Frei in the same camp as some of the most prominent evangelical apologists. For it seems to me that Frei is here stress-

27 Carl F. H. Henry, 'Narrative Theology: An Appraisal', *Trinity Journal* 8 (Spring 1987), 11.

28 *Ibid.*, 7. Frei is aware of this, and agrees that although there is no historical proof that substantiates the resurrection, it is possible that negative evidence could be amassed that would disprove the reality of the resurrection. Exactly what would prove the resurrection to be ahistorical, Frei does not explain (*Theology and Narrative*, 86—87).

29 Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 86.

ing the probability, not the certitude, of Christ's resurrection. This approach was the one taken by evangelical theologian/apologist Edward John Carnell: 'Christian faith . . . cannot rise above rational probability. Probability is that state of coherence in which more evidences can be corralled for a given hypothesis than can be amassed against it. . . . Since Christianity is a way of life, and not an unabridged edition of the Pythagorean Theorem, it cannot enjoy the demonstrative certainty of the latter.'³⁰ The evidence for Christ's death and resurrection is strong, but it is not so strong as to make the resurrection an undeniable fact of history (but of course, how could one prove that any event that happened two thousand years ago is irrefutably true?). John Warwick Montgomery, one of the ablest evangelical defenders of the resurrection in the twentieth century, constantly stressed this point in his writings. Although he believes that the evidence for the resurrection is strong, he knows it is not irrefutable. But what of that? As Montgomery wisely points out, we live our lives based on probabilities, including many of the most important decisions we make.³¹ Why should faith in the resurrection be any different?

So Frei apparently was inclined to see the resurrection *perhaps* as a real event in history, although he did not fully commit himself to its historicity. This lack of commitment is criticized by Henry, who chides narrative theologians like Frei for advocating 'uncertainty over historicity'.³² Frei wrote a brief response to Henry's critique and attempted to explain his position. His answer to Henry is, basically, that he is attempting to secure a middle ground between 'liberal' and 'conservative' views on the matter of God's revelation in history, but especially as it pertains to the divine revelation of God in Christ.³³ Henry, in his critique, was asking Frei to commit to an either/or dichotomistic view of scripture. He thought that Frei (and other narrative theologians) should clearly state whether or not the biblical narratives had an objective basis in history, because 'it is incumbent on those who claim that narrative story and [biblical] history are not

30 Edward John Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 113.

31 John Warwick Montgomery, *Human Rights and Human Dignity* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, Inc. 1986) 152–54.

32 Henry, "Narrative Theology," 13.

33 Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 207–212. Interestingly enough, Frei says that his most famous work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, was written more against liberals than conservatives. Frei knew that liberals had largely abandoned the 'plain meaning' of the text because they had become consumed with historical-critical issues. Frei wanted to remind them that, in the Bible, 'the text means what it says' (208).

incompatible to clarify which historical specifics are non-negotiable.³⁴

But Frei would not be so easily pinned down. He wanted to move beyond the conservative/liberal theological impasse. He objected to Henry's attempts to force him into a narrative versus history position because, for Frei, terms like 'historical reality' are not

as theory-free, as neutral as he [Henry] seems to think they are. . . . If I am asked to use the language of factuality, then I would say, yes, in those terms, I have to speak of an empty tomb. In those terms I have to speak of the literal resurrection. But I think those terms are not privileged, theory-neutral, trans-cultural, an ingredient in the structure of the human mind and of reality always and everywhere for me, as I think they are for Dr. Henry.³⁵

Essentially, Frei is telling Henry that, if he must play by Henry's 'rules', then yes, the resurrection was an historical event. However, he does not agree that Henry's rules are binding upon all Christians, because a term like 'reference' (or even 'truth') 'in Christian usage is not a simple, single, or philosophically univocal category.'³⁶ Frei is accusing Henry of assessing his thought in perhaps an overly simplistic manner, and maybe it is true that Henry does not capture all the nuances that Frei makes between different types of theological reality.³⁷ But Henry raises a question that Frei cannot avoid: are the truths found in the narrative portions of scripture based on actual events of history? And if they are not, why should anyone take them seriously in terms of the truth they allegedly convey? Could not just as much truth be found in the Hindu scriptures, which do not pretend to have the same type of historical foundation that the Christian scriptures claim? To this Frei gave no real answer, and his position that truth is not "univocal" (whatever that may mean) is not helpful when faced with the type of unavoidable question that Henry asks.

Despite his refusal to provide a forthright answer to Henry, he does give an answer of sorts, and it reminds me of the 'reformed epistemological' approach that Alvin Plantinga would develop just a few years after Frei as an alternative to traditional evidentialist apologetics. For Plantinga, belief in God is 'properly basic' so long as certain conditions are met. Those conditions arise within the Christian com-

34 Henry, 'Narrative Theology', 13.

35 Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 211.

36 *Ibid.*, 210.

37 For more on the Henry/Frei matter, see George Hunsinger, 'What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Learn From Each Other? The Carl Henry – Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered', in *The Nature of Confession* eds. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 134 – 150.

munity itself (this, recall, is part of Frei's apologetic, too). That is, the Christian community largely determines the faith of its individual members. For those inside the Christian community, Christian faith is properly basic, and therefore as valid a belief as any other belief.³⁸ For Plantinga, the Christian community shares certain beliefs about God. These beliefs gave shape to that community, and provide the basis of its world-view. These beliefs are shaped by scripture, but also by the experiences that Christians within the community share, such as 'guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God's presence, [and] a sense that he speaks.'³⁹ The Christian may not be able to convince everyone that his beliefs are true, but this does not render his faith invalid, according to Plantinga. One scholar sums up Plantinga's position as follows: 'For example, I might *know* that I am hungry, even if I can't convince you through an argument. In the same way, the believer might know that God exists in some immediate or non-inferential way, but not be able to convince others of her knowledge.'⁴⁰ Plantinga's point is that, for a Christian, the Christian worldview 'makes sense' and seems to be a valid approach to life, even if one cannot 'prove' that her faith is true beyond a doubt. Still, for the Christian, her belief can be termed properly basic, because it does not rest upon any 'foundational' belief. For Plantinga, belief in God is its own foundation, if you will.⁴¹

In Plantinga-like fashion, Frei maintained that he was not overly concerned with the type of historical issue Henry raises, because 'belief in the divine authority of Scripture is for me simply that we do not need more. The narrative description there is adequate. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" is an adequate statement for what we refer to, though we cannot say univocally how we

38 Stanley J. Grenz, 'Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method After the Demise of Foundationalism', in *Evangelical Futures* (ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 131—33.

39 Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81.

40 Donald Hatcher, 'Plantinga and Reformed Epistemology: A Critique', *Philosophy and Theology* 1 (Fall 1986); 88.

41 Here, Plantinga reminds me very much of the presuppositionalist approach to apologetics developed by Cornelius Van Til. For Van Til, too, Christian belief could not be deduced from any sort of argument. It simply is a God-given fact, and it provides the Christian with the correct way of viewing and interpreting the world. See, for instance, his *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955.) For an assessment of his thought, by both fellow presuppositionalists as well as evidentialists, see *Jerusalem and Athens* ed. E.R.Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971).

refer to it.⁴² This, much like Plantinga's position, deems the faith of the Christian community in and of itself sufficient; no 'confirmation' of the faith is required from any source outside the narrative of the Bible. Aside from the charge of fideism that such a position is open to, the question must again be asked, *why* should the Christian community hold this faith? How does it know that Christ was the means whereby God reconciled the world to himself? Is Christ as the unsubstitutable One sufficient grounds for a life commitment? Or, must we assert with Henry, that,

The narrative approach therefore seems not fully befitting the historic Christian faith, nor fully serviceable to the need for an intellectually compelling argument with modernity. Readers may and often do find in the biblical narrative a means of grace that stirs the spirit, and also claims and evidences which involve a supernatural resolution of the human dilemma, and centered supremely in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. But neither a transcendent revelatory content nor objective scriptural inspiration lends supernatural sanction to the biblical drama when read on narrative premises. One discerns here an enchantment with the affective, a flight from history to the perspectival that enjoins no universal truth-claims, a reflection of the revolt against reason, a reliance in "symbolic truth" and imagination, an interest in earthly theatre more than in [historically] revealed theology.⁴³

Conclusion: Toward a Historically-Based Narrative Theology

Henry, it seems, is right; the more the narrative aspect of scripture is emphasized, the less attention is given to the historical aspect of Christianity. And since Christianity is a 'religion of the book', a historically-based religion, Henry's comments must be taken seriously. This is especially true since, as Frei himself admitted, the culmination of the Christian story is the resurrection of Christ, and Frei almost begrudgingly admits that the resurrection is probably a historical event. But why could not Frei's powerful argument for the truth of the resurrection be combined with the traditional 'evidences' for the resurrection's historicity? Why did Frei insist on choosing narrative to the exclusion of all else? His call to treat scripture as narrative, that is, to take seriously the story of the Bible, was well-founded. The scriptures, especially the passion/resurrection narratives, lose all their transformative religious and moral authority when they are reduced by the biblical critic to isolated literary units. But why did Frei's posi-

42 Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 210.

43 Henry, 'Narrative Theology', 19.

tion involve narrative and nothing but narrative? His thesis of Christ as the unsubstitutable one would have lost nothing of its power had he been open to other types of evidential support for the historicity of the resurrection. Indeed, this openness would have only made his position stronger. As Gabriel Fackre has written, 'Story by no means excludes history. The Christian recital could not exclude empirical narrative or it would cease to be Christian, for its central events presuppose hard empirical claims – Jesus did live, Jesus did die on the cross.'⁴⁴ As far as I know, Frei in his writings never said why a narrative approach must rule out all other types of approaches to scripture. He saw narrative as a corrective to scholars who were consumed with historical issues, and in this he was correct. But why all historical issues must necessarily be eclipsed by narrative interpretation, he never explained. In fact, just before his death, in a lecture at Yale University, he seemed to have even less interest in historical referents. By the mid 1980s, he had absorbed enough of structuralists and post-structuralists thought that he apparently saw the text and what the text 'referred to' as completely distinct from each other.⁴⁵

In conclusion, it may be said that Frei as an apologist for the resurrection of Christ both succeeded and failed at the same time. Frei was right to insist that the reality of the resurrection is only probable; were it a certain fact, the New Testament's teaching on the necessity of faith would make little sense. But the New Testament does not encourage a fideistic sort of faith, either. It seems to me that Frei would have made his good case for the resurrection of Christ immeasurably stronger had he *combined* his idea of Christ as the unsubstitutable one, along with a proper respect for the apologetic arguments for the resurrection that are found in traditional evidentialist apologists. This would have allowed Frei to have the best of both worlds. He could have retained the idea (along with Plantinga) that the Christian community, not hostile biblical critics, should be the final arbiter of the Jesus stories. He could have maintained his unique concept of Jesus as the one who had to be raised based upon the utter uniqueness of his person (Frei's 'ontological' argument). He could have kept the key idea (as found in Carnell and Montgomery) that belief in the resurrection must involve a degree of faith;

44 Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 27.

45 David Lee, *Luke's Stories of Jesus: Theological Reading of Gospel Narrative and the Legacy of Hans Frei* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 91 – 95. For those seeking a book-length, detailed analysis of Frei's work, this book will prove very useful.

it is not a tautological certainty. And he could have availed himself of the New Testament evidence for the resurrection, evidence that the biblical writers thought was so strong that they based their entire kerygmatic message upon it, as reflected not only in the gospels but in the Book of Acts as well. Still, despite his shortcomings, Hans Frei must, in the end, be regarded as no less than a powerful apologetic witness for the abiding truth of the resurrection event. For, in defiance of the 'liberals', he offered an ontological Christ who could be understood *only* as risen Lord. Against narrative-undermining biblical critics, he asserted that the story of Jesus can be properly understood only by the Christian community. And he reminded the 'fundamentalists' that the resurrection's truth is only probable but, when combined with personal faith, the result is a confident belief that Jesus was the unsubstitutable one who rose on Easter morning.

Abstract

Hans Frei has usually been considered a liberal, and certainly no apologist for the resurrection. However, in this paper I try to show that he is indeed an apologist of sorts for the resurrection, especially with his idea that Christ is the "unsubstitutable one" for Christians, one who cannot be thought of as *not* rising from the dead. Still, Frei's position is somewhat weak, because he does not take seriously evidentialist strands of proof for the historicity of the resurrection. Such evidence includes the NT witness that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, as well as arguments formulated by various apologists that Christ's resurrection is quite probable (though not certain beyond a doubt). Had Frei combined his position with that of the evidentialists, he would have been able to offer a strong apologetic indeed.

The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology

Editor: Colin Brown

A four volume set offering concise discussions of all the major theological terms in the New Testament against the background of classical and koine Greek, the Old Testament, Rabbinical thought and different usages in the New Testament.

0-85364-432-2 / 4 Volumes, total 3506pp / hb / 240x165mm / £119.99

Paternoster Press, PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK