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Historical Reference and the Gospels

In these notes, Frei responds to a critique of The Identity of Jesus Christ—a critique we have been unable to identify. The notes provide a brief but important comment on the kinds of historical reference Frei thought the gospel narratives achieved. The portions of the text available in the Yale archive are not complete, but what is there is fairly coherent. (CPH ?1981c. YDS 13–199)

BETWEEN LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE

Suppose someone who believed
(1) that Jesus Christ did live,

(2) that this is essential for the religion named after him, and

(3) that the accounts describing his life state some things that are more important than others for the affirmation of (2).

Then, I want to say, the crucifixion and resurrection are the most important. On this a non-believer and a believer should be able to agree.

Not only whether, but in what mode this described sequence is historical is so far undetermined.

Now someone might then go ahead and say: Simple! Just adduce evidence about the credibility of the witnesses, the veracity of the authors,

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the possibility that God can perform miracles because he's in charge of the universe, the direction we find religion and the history of the world in general taking, etc., and you can make the transition from hermeneutics, or exegesis of the texts, not only to the affirmation of their veracity but also to a clear statement of the mode in which these events happened (e.g., the resurrected body of Jesus was or was not subject to the law of gravity).

This sheet breaks off here, but other sheets pick up the argument at about the same place: the description of ways in which the "mode" in which the crucifixion-resurrection sequence is 'historical' has been determined—in this case, by conservatives and liberals.

On the one hand, there are liberal affirmations to the effect that the logical and real subject of resurrection statements is the faith of the disciples, that statements about the resurrection do not describe events but the *significance* of other events, that the resurrection was spiritual, that it isn't crucial to Christianity, etc.

On the other hand, conservatives not only claim that Jesus is the subject of the statements about the resurrection but that these statements describe the manner of his resurrected state, e.g., that one can adjudicate whether his resurrected body was or else was not subject to the laws of gravity.

My dilemma is the obvious one: the first set of remarks seems to me a pure evasion of the texts and implies a willingness to surrender what seems to me an indispensable aspect of what makes the gospel good news. The second I find impossible to believe.

A properly modest and realistic self-appraisal is imperative at this point: Can one find another way that is honest to the texts? Or does one, in the search for such an option, simply discover in the texts (with great excitement) the fruits of the theological and hermeneutical seeds one has oneself sown prior to and independent of the exegesis? I tried at least to be alert to that problem, whether I escaped it or not in making my exegetical inquiry.

EXEGESIS OVER HERMENEUTICS

I must stress, however, that the exegesis was of extraordinary importance to me, and that I tried to make the hermeneutical instruments as minimal and non-interfering as possible. My exegesis was not merely the proof-text of an argument for me. It should be discussed because it helped not only to test but to shape a third option, as well as the conditions necessary for understanding and believing it. I tried to allow the text to influence not only the content, i.e., the application of the rules of thought to my re-rendering of the descriptions given in the texts, but to influence the rules of thought by which I was proceeding, “the conditions for the possibility of understanding” the texts, as our phenomenological friends would say.

Not that I believed there is no “pre-understanding” (to quote another set of friends), that there are no formal rules for making intelligible statements as well as claims, no rules covering various types of argument. But I believed and still believe that I ought to leave open the possibility that a reading of the texts might actually and in principle influence, modify, change these preconditions, rules, or what have you. Obviously, my desires may have dictated not only that notion but the way in which it affected my actual restatement of the texts. I can only hope that this fault remained within bounds, and also that I did not become incoherent as I went along in this process. I hoped that coherence between the content of the exegesis and the description of the formal rules under which it took place—both, and not only the former, being referred to the text—might actually constitute an argument against those who argue that exegesis is simply governed by the theological design that goes into it. Obversely, it was to de-rigidify those who know *a priori* and with absolute confidence all the rules under which texts are understood.

AN ANSELMIAN ARGUMENT

Now about those formal rules under which my exegesis took place. Let’s forget about the formal description of personhood, since that’s not at issue between us. What is at issue is the status of my apparently muddled claim that the description of Jesus Christ, i.e., the exegetical restatement of the text’s narrative and its structure, involves the claim that Jesus Christ is one who cannot not live. I argue that this is not my claim but the upshot of the exegesis of the gospel stories—not only at the climactic point of the actual

resurrection accounts but both there and in the teleological order of the whole narrative leading up to it. (I should like to leave moot, until we can discuss it, how this may be related to confirmation or disconfirmation of statements about Jesus, up to the crucifixion. Likewise also my perhaps too strong statements about the unverifiability in principle of the resurrection claims, a matter on which I find it difficult to sort out my options.)

That is to say then that to me a faithful reading of the accounts involves their claim that in this instance the factual truth of the resurrection of Jesus is entailed in the identification of who or what he is. The judgment of the truth of the proposition is analytically related to the concept “Jesus Christ”—if “concept” is the right term to apply to the identification of a person by means of his narrative. Do I really need to point out the parallel between this procedure and Anselm’s argument in the *Proslogion* that God’s existence is necessarily implied in the proper definition of the concept “God”? My definition of the believer and of the logic of belief with regard to this matter is simply that she says yes to this move in the text.

SENSE, REFERENCE—AND INSPIRATION

In other words, for the believer, the relation between the conceptual or semantic sense of the sentences that make up the story, and the proposition she believes is congruent with it, is definitely not that of a “basic distinction” (contra p. 15, your essay). What it is may or may not be difficult in this instance. And by the way, I have a hunch—despite the fact that you are a far better philosopher than I—that some philosophers may suggest that not only in this instance but in general the distinction between sentences and propositions is not as simple, clear, and basic as you propose. However, I want to distinguish between arguing a general case, and arguing only that you are wrong in this particular instance. Right now I want only to say that the latter is the case, if my exegesis of the narrative is right and the text forces us to revise, in this instance, our usual assumption about the formal rules. Whether more than that can be done is a different matter, on which I will touch in a moment.

The same thing, of course, has to be said with respect to the relation between the meaning and truth of the gospel narratives. The former, according to the accounts under this exegesis, cannot stand independently of its truth (contra your essay, p. 16). In the view of the accounts those who deny its truth have not understood who Jesus is; i.e., the contrary to truth

in this case is self-contradiction, meaninglessness, not falsity. That this is a startling claim I admit. I believe it may well be an absolutely unique case, and that this revision of the rules may not apply to any other factual case, for in no other case is the relation between *quidditas* and *haeccitas* analytical. And so a perfect island does not exist necessarily, nor was someone fitting the narrative description of Othello raised from the dead to be our savior. However, should the same story as that about Jesus be told of someone else—say somebody who calls himself the Rev. Mr. Moon—then there is a problem, and I would make up my mind between what I can only take to be rival claims on the basis of which account and therefore which person I believe to be inspired by divine grace and therefore authoritative. Until better instructed I believe Scripture to be of unique divine inspiration, a miraculous grace for which no independent external evidence or *a priori* reason can be adduced, though some *a posteriori* support can be given, e.g., the extraordinary fitness of Jesus' attitude in the story to a vision of life and salvation infinitely richer than that of the Mr. Moon, to the extent that I am acquainted with the latter's life and attitudes.

ASSUMPTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

On one matter, of which you make much, I plead guilty to a kind of fall-back on common sense, to which someone may say I have no right. I am assuming that somebody roughly fitting Jesus of Nazareth as described in the Gospels really did live. If and when it is shown that this assumption is unwarranted and the person invented, I will no longer want to be a Christian. Until then, I plan to go on being one and saying, "We know him only under a description, viz., that of the gospel accounts, and they say that the point at which possibly but not necessarily fictional depiction and factual reality are seen to be fully one is the resurrection. In abstraction from the full connection between them at that point of the depiction, the relation between every description of individual incident and putative factual assertion corresponding to it is simply more or less probable."

MEANING, ASSERTION, AND REFERENCE

More bothersome to me is the continuing misunderstanding between us on a matter that is basic to what I have claimed in *Eclipse* (but see also the Preface to *Identity*). It is admittedly not easy to put, but it needs airing

and argument, and it covers what I have already referred to with regard to your relating of sentences and propositions as well as meaning and truth. At this point, then, I want with due caution to make a more general case of a hermeneutical sort rather than simply appeal to the hermeneutical requirements congruent with the gospel accounts.

If you are clear here, I take you to be saying that the meaning of a statement is not the statement itself, or the sentences, or, in our case, the narrative, but, logically distinct from any and all such, the propositions they “express” (is that really a good term?). In other words, the meaning of the gospel narratives is the ideal truths or else the spatio-temporal occurrences (or both) to which they refer. Now of course I do not deny that the narratives may or may not refer—in fact I believe they do at a crucial point—but I believe this is not their “meaning” but a judgment made about them. They mean what they say (unlike some other types of narratives) whether they refer or not. Thus, when I treat them exegetically, or hermeneutically, I have at least to make a distinction between “assertion” as part of the narrative sense, and “assertion” as trans-hermeneutical judgment, whether the author’s, mine, or that of other readers—and confine myself to the former. Indeed I am not quite confident that “assertion” in the usual sense, even in the former mode, is applicable to the descriptive meaning of a statement. Whatever I believe the authors believed (and of course I think they believed what they wrote was true), the meaning of what they wrote is a logically distinct matter and is the subject of hermeneutical inquiry.

Which if any assertion(s) is (are) identical with the story and therefore part of the narrative sense rather than a matter of judgment is a far more complex matter in a hermeneutical inquiry than you allow for (indeed, I think, more complex than your analytical instruments permit you to handle). My sense of the matter, admittedly groping and uncertain, is that “assertion” or something like it as a matter of the narrative description rather than logically distinct judgment is part of the narratives and, again, its focus is at the point of the resurrection. Again, that is what is so startling here, that it is part of the descriptive sense rather than a matter of judgment; and the reader is asked to understand it as such. No novel and no history, I believe, does this. In novels and histories the sharp distinction between meaning and assertion is sharply implied, and a contrary judgment given in the two cases. And this is a well-understood agreement—you might even call it a quiet conspiracy between writers and readers.

THE ECLIPSE OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

I proposed in *Eclipse* that the identification of meaning with (true or false) assertion or proposition, and the resultant equation of meaning with reference is an instance of a category mistake, or a confusion that has had disastrous consequences in the history of modern exegesis and theology—consequences that were all the worse for the fact that those perpetrating the confusion were prevented by the rigidity of their formal instruments from seeing what was happening.

The consequence was that there was forced on us as exclusive options the following: Either one became a rationalist (affirmative like Paulus,¹ or else radically sceptical like Strauss or in our day Van Harvey who, unable to stay with the conclusion they had to reach on this basis, i.e., that of identifying the meaning of the narratives with their not referring—because obviously there must be something to these stories—gave up altogether on the relation between sense and reference in regard to the Gospels and fled to myth or existential perspective for their interpretation); or else one became a rational supernaturalist.

Small wonder that theological liberals fled into their desert of vagueness to escape this choice; small wonder, in the face of this Hobson's choice, the bacchanalian frenzy of procedures like Hegel's: anything to escape this blunted and rigid exclusiveness and try to get formal procedure and Christian content into some kind of more fitting relation! Small wonder that the richness of orthodoxy got lost, unable to distinguish itself from the reduced rationalist-supernaturalist version of itself. And now you want to fit me into that very Procrustean bed—which I had indicated, clearly I thought, to be an exegetically wrong and hermeneutically confused and therefore impossible enterprise. And you propose that as a position “that shows promise of overcoming some of the difficulties in Frei's view of realistic biblical narratives”!

REFERENTIAL RESERVE

I'll return to that matter in a moment. But in order to do so properly I need to pay heed to the sentence “My car is red,” whose meaning, as distinct from the statement “My car is red” is “proposition B” (I suppose: “My car really is

1. [Heinrich Paulus (1761–1851), German rationalist theologian and historical critic.]

red”). I am, of course, not at all sure of your intention here. It could simply be an affirmation that the logical and/or real subject of statements about the resurrection of Jesus is Jesus and not something or somebody else. If that is the case, there is no problem between us on this matter, apart from your claim that “Jesus” is for me not even a logical subject. I have indicated that it is not the name of the person but the depiction of him by his story that goes into the unsubstitutable identification of him, whether in a real or fictional story, and that we can know him only in that story, whereas you apparently have something else in mind as counting for identification of the person, though just what it is you haven’t said. So let us assume that we do agree that Jesus is the logical and real subject of statements about him, including statements that he was raised from the dead.

My problem is with the possible further force of the statement. I may be mistaken, and if so, just cancel out what I’m about to say. In the meantime, however, I take it that for you the force of the statement is that it is in principle subject to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. I’ll admit that my own view of the matter has serious difficulties—though I am content to choose these rather than the optional set of problems. “My car is red” presumably stresses not only that it is the car and not the barn that is red, but that the car is red rather than blue and that it is red in the way cars and New England barns are red rather than the way Lenin and Stalin are said to be red. In other words, I take it that you are using the predicate in such a way that you (1) know the mode of its signification, and (2) want to affirm that mode to be such that confirmation and disconfirmation is in principle appropriate to statements containing this predicate. The statement or assertion that your car is red is, I take it, equivalent to saying not only that it is Jesus who was raised bodily from the dead but that as that subject his body was characterized by weight or weightlessness, i.e., specifiable bodily characteristics of which one set was more probably the case than another.

At this point I want to exercise the greatest possible reserve, as you noted with disapproval (p. 8, your essay).

[And there, sadly, the notes end.]