

**Murray Rae, *History and Hermeneutics*
(London: T & T Clark, 2005) chapter 4**

4

RESURRECTION

In his account of the limitations of historical-critical method for understanding who Jesus is, Francis Watson writes that,

Even Christian historians who at a ‘personal level accept that Jesus is the Christ, will be subject to the constraints of this methodologically atheistic worldview—unless they are prepared to rethink what ‘history’ is, on the basis of theology.¹

Rethinking what history is, on the basis of theology, was the task begun in chapter two, in which it was argued that the biblical notions of creation and promise provide the foundations of a theological conception of history. In the present chapter that theology of history will be brought to sharper focus by attending to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the one who is the firstborn of a new creation, and in whom, as such, God’s purpose for the whole creation is inaugurated and its fulfilment anticipated. I hope to contribute by this endeavour to what Watson calls ‘a theologically informed approach to the “historical Jesus” that operates *within* the ideological perspective of the gospels, according to which Jesus is the Christ, the final meaning of history.’²

I want to explore two theses in this chapter. The first is that the resurrection is the key to understanding ‘the Jesus of history’. The second is that the resurrection of Jesus reveals his history to be the key to the interpretation of history as a whole, bringing to fulfilment the Old Testament promise that through the descendents of Abraham all the families of the earth will be blessed, and inaugurating the new creation in which all things will be reconciled with God. In elaboration of these two themes, we shall also have to consider what kind of event the resurrection is and how it can be known.

¹ Francis Watson, ‘The Quest for the Real Jesus’ in Markus Bockmuehl, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 156-69, 164.

² Watson, ‘The Quest for the Real Jesus’ 164.

I The History of Jesus

It is a common observation among biblical scholars that the New Testament is written from the perspective of those who believe that this Jesus who was crucified is no longer dead but has been raised by God. C.F. Evans thus writes,

Of the synoptic gospels it would not be sufficient to say simply that they conclude with resurrection narratives, for it is only in the light of faith in the risen Lord that they were written at all...³

That observation is so far uncontroversial but the implications of the observation do not remain so. What is to be made of this faith in the risen Lord? Does it render the reports of the evangelists unreliable, as is commonly alleged? Does such faith shift the balance of the gospel accounts away from historical narrative and toward the genre of myth as Strauss, Bultmann and their like have argued? Do the gospels reveal therefore, a great deal about the religious convictions and interests of the early church, and very little about Jesus himself as has sometimes been alleged in the recent history of biblical scholarship?⁴ Pursuit of one or more of these suppositions has been widespread among scholars during the past two hundred years, or, more precisely, ever since Hermann Samuel Reimarus in the early eighteenth century first argued that stories of the resurrection were fabricated by the disappointed disciples who had given up all to follow Jesus in the expectation of worldly wealth and power. After the ignominious failure of Jesus' death, so Reimarus contends, the disciples sought to bring about the fulfilment of this expectation as best they could by fabricating the story of Jesus' resurrection.⁵ The 'fictitious invention' of the resurrection legend, Reimarus further explains, continued with the evangelists who rewrote the history of Jesus and presented his whole life as a passage to this triumphant

³ C.F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1970) 4.

⁴ Donald L. Denton, Jr credits Strauss with 'shifting the focus in Jesus studies from the event narrated in the Gospels, to the account itself.' See Denton, *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies: An Examination of the Work of John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer*, JSNT Supplement 262 (London: T & T Clark, 2004) 103.

⁵ See discussion of Reimarus in chapter 1 above, and for the point here see Reimarus, 'Concerning the Intention of Jesus and His Teaching, Part II §53, 242.

end. Although the efforts of historians and biblical interpreters willing to accept Reimarus' discounting of the resurrection have not produced any consistent picture of the Jesus 'behind' the text, it remains a widely accepted axiom of biblical interpretation that the 'bias' of resurrection faith must be put to one side.⁶ Even some Christian scholars who believe in the resurrection have been intimidated by such an axiom and have felt obliged to 'concede' the impact of resurrection faith upon the writings of the New Testament. Christopher Tuckett, for instance, writes:

Virtually all the evidence we have has been preserved by Christians, all of whom clearly regarded Jesus in a positive light. That in turn makes for its own peculiar difficulties in handling the evidence, above all because it is potentially influenced by Christians' belief that the Jesus about whom they wrote had in some real sense been raised from death by God and was now alive in their present.⁷

Tuckett goes on to admit that 'accounts of Jesus by others may be equally affected by their authors' beliefs and attitudes!'⁸ but by this time the aspersions have been cast—resurrection faith renders the evidence of the gospels problematic in one way or another. Erosion of confidence in the historical value of the biblical testimony is apparent too in Amos Wilder's admission that, 'we concede that the picture of Jesus given to us in all four Gospels was shaped by the early resurrection faith rather than by an objective historical interest as *we* understand that'.⁹ Wilder's words were formulated almost fifty years ago at a time when there was less awareness of the problematic nature of the claim to objectivity, and yet, as evidenced by Tuckett above, who is far from a thorough-going

⁶ Robert Funk and Roy Hoover, for example, speaking on behalf of 'The Jesus Seminar', consider it a 'rule of evidence' that the evangelists 'christianized' Jesus by making him conform to what they later came to believe. See *The Five Gospels*, 24-5. The 'rule' is used to deny the authenticity of any sayings placed on Jesus' lips which sound too much like what a Christian believes, and thus to uncover the real Jesus 'behind the Christian façade of the Christ'. 2.

⁷ Christopher Tuckett, 'Sources and Methods' in Markus Bockmuehl, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 121-37, 122-3.

⁸ Tuckett, 123.

⁹ Amos N. Wilder, *Otherworldliness and the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955) 80. Gerd Theissen similarly expresses the desire to 'get behind the Christian images of Jesus shaped by Easter and find the historical reality before Easter.' Gerd Theissen, 'Historical Scepticism and the Criteria of Jesus Research or My Attempt to Leap Across Lessing's Yawning Gulf' in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49.4 (1996) 147-76, 162.

sceptic, the assumption remains widespread that belief in the resurrection gets in the way of a true account of the history of Jesus as it really was. It is clear enough, of course, that if the resurrection didn't happen, or if the accounts of the resurrection do not refer to something that happened to Jesus but describe, rather, a transformation in the minds of the first disciples, then the gospels do falsify the history of Jesus. Wolfhart Pannenberg is correct in noting that 'only because of the resurrection of Jesus were the Synoptics able to describe his earthly cause to be the cause of the Messiah or of the Son of Man'.¹⁰ Without the resurrection, therefore, the theological claims of the gospels must be discounted. The faith of the evangelists is in vain.

The alternative view, and the one I propose to explore here, is that far from falsifying the history of Jesus, the resurrection is that which enables us to see the history of Jesus aright. The resurrection is the light shone backwards on the career of Jesus that makes sense and reveals the truth of the whole. The principle at work here is evident in the claim of John 12:16: 'His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.' Or, as the principle has been put more recently by Gerald Downing, 'It is only in the light of what happens next that you can hope to understand and explain what has been happening.'¹¹ Thus, according to Graham Stanton, the first followers of Jesus believed that 'only in the light both of Resurrection faith and of the gift of the Spirit was it possible to understand the full significance of the story of Jesus'.¹² The real Jesus of history, in other words, is to be sought and understood not apart from or behind but precisely through the testimonies of those who believe him to have been raised from the dead. Martin Kähler is in this respect correct: the real Christ *is* the preached Christ. It was the resurrection, Kähler argues, 'that first placed this earthly life in its proper perspective and gave it its implicit and appropriate content.'¹³ The true

¹⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?' in *Dialog*, Spring (1965). Reprinted in Richard Batey (ed) *New Testament Issues* (London: SCM Press, 1970) 102-17, 103.

¹¹ F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992) 167. Cited in N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) 109n.

¹² Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 299.

¹³ Martin Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*. Cited in Daniel P. Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (London: Tyndale Press, 1968) 70.

content and import of the beginning and middle of the history of Jesus is disclosed through what happens at the end.¹⁴

But here we come to a difficulty. Is what is claimed about Jesus at the end itself true? Was Jesus raised from the dead? According to the view of history that has prevailed in western thought, namely that history is a closed causal continuum impenetrable to the action of God, the resurrection is simply an impossibility—we *know* that dead men do not rise! The matter has been put this way not only by incredulous historians but by theologians too. Rudolf Bultmann, to take only the most influential example, asserts that ‘An historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable.’¹⁵ But the question we have been exploring in this book is whether the prevailing western view of history is adequate to the task of perceiving what took place in Jesus. Might it not be that what happened through and to Jesus requires a transformation of what we suppose is possible in this world? Such transformations are not unprecedented. Who would have supposed one hundred years ago, for instance, that one could see and talk to people in real time on the other side of the globe? Satellite technology has transformed our conceptions of what is possible in the world. The resurrection, similarly, brings about a new understanding of the way reality is constituted. If this is true, then the old paradigms of historical and scientific inquiry will be inadequate for the task of apprehending this reality. ‘Seeing’ the resurrection, therefore, is not possible within the prevailing canons of historical-critical inquiry, not, as we shall argue, because the resurrection is not an historical event, but rather because history itself has been misconceived by historians as a causal series from which God is necessarily excluded. In attempting to see history apart from the Creator and Lord of history, historians fail in important ways to see it all.¹⁶ Within such constraints, it is true that dead men don’t rise, just as it is also true that with the most powerful set of binoculars and a

¹⁴ This principle has recently been expounded by David C. Steinmetz in ‘Uncovering a Second Narrative: Detective Fiction and the Construction of Historical Method’ in Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays eds. *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 54-65. Drawing an analogy between the reading of Scripture and the reading of a mystery or detective novel, Steinmetz suggests that the plots of both are understood aright only in the light of ‘how things turn out’.

¹⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 39.

¹⁶ I have adapted here the contention of Colin Gunton that ‘in attempting to see creation apart from the Creator [Modern thinkers] fail in important ways to see it all.’ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 216.

state of the art megaphone, I cannot converse with my friends on the other side of the world.

At this point, however, we must leave the analogy to one side. For, unlike the marvels of global communication, one's apprehension of the resurrection is not brought about by human ingenuity or by better procedural tools. The transformation in our 'seeing' takes place, rather, under the impact of the new reality itself, the reality of the risen Christ. It was Jesus' appearance to the disciples—not human testimony,¹⁷ nor their own investigative efforts at the empty tomb¹⁸—that convinced them that he was alive. For the disciples in Jerusalem and in Galilee, according to the gospel record, the appearances involved the bodily presence of Jesus, while for Paul on the road to Damascus the appearance took the form of a vision. In both cases, however, encounter with the risen Lord brought about the conversion of minds and hearts that is integral to one's apprehension of the resurrection itself. Such appearances could not be accounted for within any conception of history that the disciples had hitherto understood. That is why the women's testimony was not believed. It is the resurrection itself, revealed in and through the appearance of the risen Christ, that prompted in the disciples a new way of seeing and a new way of understanding what history really is—the terrain in which God's redemptive and re-creative purposes for the world are being worked out. Conversion to this new way of seeing cannot be engineered, nor contrived. It is made possible rather by grace, and is dependent upon the self-disclosure of the risen Christ himself. If an analogy from quotidian experience is needed, it is like learning that one is loved. That experience too has an epistemic dimension, but it yields knowledge that is not accessible to or verifiable within the usual canons of scientific or purportedly objective inquiry. I do not deny here the value of scientific inquiry, but rather its omniscience. The same is true of historical-critical investigation into the testimonies of the Bible. It is not that such

¹⁷ See Luke 24:11, 'But these words [of the women] seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.' Compare Luke 24:21-25.

¹⁸ When Peter went to the empty tomb, he saw the linen cloths by themselves and, while this amazed him, he apparently did not yet believe. Instead, he simply went home! (Luke 24:12) John's gospel offers a more ambiguous account of the disciples' visit to the empty tomb. At 20:8 we read, 'Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed'. It is not clear what he believed, however, for we then read, 'for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.' Did he believe, simply, that the tomb was indeed empty as Mary Magdalene had said? The words that follow suggest that this is not yet equivalent to the belief that Jesus had been raised.

investigation yields nothing of value—far from it,¹⁹ but in the case of the resurrection, there is much more to the reality than can be revealed through historical inquiry alone.

So far I have simply offered a general statement of the position I am arguing. It is time now to support the position with some more detailed argument.

II The event of the resurrection.

It is necessary to consider, in speaking of the resurrection, what kind of event it was. Theologians of the modern era have been deeply divided on this matter. In a recent essay Carl Braaten suggests that ‘the easiest way to characterize the debate is by using two familiar words: history and eschatology’.²⁰ Braaten explains that,

[o]ne side of the debate will urge that the resurrection is indeed a historical event. The name of Wolfhart Pannenberg is typically associated with this position. The other side speaks of the resurrection as an eschatological event. Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, as different as their positions finally came to be developed, are often attached to this eschatological view.²¹

There is a further division, however, between those who hold the resurrection to be an historical event apprehensible through historical critical inquiry, and by those who claim it as an historical event but argue that it may be known only through faith. Braaten offers Pannenberg as a representative of the first view, and Walter Künneth as representative of the second. While this is somewhat misleading in respect of Künneth’s view, this need not concern us here.²² My interest rather is in Pannenberg who for his part insists that, ‘whether or not a particular event happened two thousand years ago is not made certain

¹⁹ There is a great deal of value for instance in the historical-critical work of N.T. Wright in his recent volume, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003). Wright does not suppose, indeed, despite criticisms made earlier of some aspects of his methodology, he argues against the view, that historical inquiry and the claims of faith are necessarily exclusive of one another.

²⁰ Carl E. Braaten, ‘The Reality of the Resurrection’ in Christopher R. Seitz (ed) *Nicene Christianity The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001) 107-18, 111.

²¹ Braaten, ‘The Reality of the Resurrection’, 111.

²² Künneth takes pains at the beginning of his book to stress ‘the untenability of the thesis of the “historicality” of the resurrection of Jesus’. Walter Künneth, *The Theology of the Resurrection*, trans. James W Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1965) 29-33.

by faith but only by historical research, to the extent that certainty can be attained at all about questions of this kind.’ And further: ‘The only method of achieving at least approximate certainty with regard to the events of a past time is historical research.’²³ While, for the first disciples the apprehension of the resurrection was contingent upon their being encountered by the risen Christ himself, for us, apparently, it is not. As we saw in chapter 2, the tools of historical inquiry are deemed by Pannenberg to be adequate to the task. As it turns out, however, Pannenberg’s own faith commitments are as evident in his inquiries as are the a-theological faith commitments of secular historians in theirs.²⁴ Pannenberg recognises, for example, that ‘the possibilities [the historian] can consider... will depend upon the understanding of reality that [s]he brings with him to the task.’²⁵ But this is precisely the problem. The ‘understanding of reality’ represented in the historiography we have surveyed in chapter 1, and which dominates both historical and biblical studies, deems the resurrection an impossibility. Only a theological understanding of reality, such as I have offered in chapter 3, and which is itself formed in the light of the events with which we are concerned affords understanding of those same events. Both cases, however, involve commitments of faith. When Pannenberg requests, therefore, ‘that an element of truth be granted to the apocalyptic expectation with regard to the hope of resurrection’,²⁶ he is asking that one faith commitment be adopted, and another one relinquished. There is simply no way to exclude faith altogether.

On the other side of the debate cited by Braaten above, are those who deny that the resurrection is an historical event at all. The resurrection is not an historical but rather an eschatological event, and belongs as such above and beyond the realm of historical investigation. The two representatives of this view referred to by Braaten offer rather different accounts of what this means. Rudolf Bultmann on the one hand, describes the resurrection as an eschatological event and means by this that nothing, as such, happened three days after Jesus’ crucifixion. Instead, as we saw in chapter two, the resurrection is considered by Bultmann to be an interpretation of the significance of the cross itself, ‘as

²³ Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 99.

²⁴ Stephen Davis has recently noted that ‘The modern study of history requires a methodological commitment to atheism or at least some version of deism.’ Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed. Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 29.

²⁵ Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 97.

²⁶ Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 97-8.

annihilating death's power in general'. 'Faith in the resurrection is really the same thing as faith in the saving efficacy of the cross.'²⁷ The resurrection is not, therefore, something that happened to Jesus, but something that happens in the minds of those who accept and participate in the new existential situation brought about by Jesus' death. It is not therefore a proper object of historical investigation, for it is not properly thought of as an event that happened in the past.

Karl Barth, on the other hand, also proclaims that the resurrection is not an historical event but means by this that it is not an event that is accessible to historical inquiry. This is closer to my own view, but I am not willing to concede that the resurrection cannot therefore be called historical. My argument, rather, is that we need a more generous account of what is historical. Historical events are those that take place in space and time—on the third day after the crucifixion, for instance, and, in and around Jerusalem and Galilee. There are no grounds to suppose that God could not be the cause of such events, although it is true, as Barth recognises, that God's involvement would render them inaccessible to any form of historical inquiry that refuses to countenance that God is active in the world.²⁸ Barth contends, indeed, that

it is sheer superstition to suppose that only things that are open to "historical" verification can have happened in time. There may have been events which happened far more really in time than the kinds of things Bultmann's scientific historian can prove. There are good grounds for supposing that the history of the resurrection of Jesus is a pre-eminent instance of such an event.²⁹

I differ from Barth here, only in being unwilling to concede to the superstitious historians, exclusive title to the term historical. I want historical to mean what it properly means, namely, that which has taken place within the created order, while acknowledging also that the created order belongs to God and is in process of being redeemed and

²⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology' 41.

²⁸ Thus Barth writes, 'We may well accept as history that which good taste prevents us from calling "historical" fact', and which the modern historian will call "saga" or "legend" on the ground that it is beyond the reach of his methods, to say nothing of his unavowed assumptions.' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 446.

²⁹ Barth, CD III.2, 446.

perfected by God. The resurrection, along with the whole career of Jesus, is on this account a transformative event, an event, that is to say, through which God's redemptive and perfecting work is done, and in the light of which our understanding of history is transformed. This is also the sense in which the historical event of the resurrection is an eschatological event. The eschatological reality of the created order, perfected and made new, is made present in the midst of history as a foretaste of what is to come. It is for this reason that Jesus is spoken of as the firstborn of creation and the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:15; 18). His perfection and life with God is the *telos* of creation as a whole. That *telos* is articulated in the further claim of Colossians 1 that 'through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven' (Col 1: 20).

To make this claim, however—and this is where the point is right that the resurrection is not apprehensible just like any other event in history—is to recognise that the resurrection bursts the bounds of the present order. That the risen Jesus walks through locked doors and mysteriously appears and disappears, might suggest a mythical embellishment of the stories of his appearances to the disciples, but it might be, instead, a portent of the new heavens and a new earth in which the old order has passed away and all things are made new. We are not presently in a position to conceive that adequately, as Paul makes clear in 1st Corinthians 15, and so we should not insist, therefore, upon construing the new reality of Christ's resurrection body within the conceptual resources of the old order. The best Paul can do is to offer suggestive but nevertheless inadequate metaphors of the transformation wrought in the making of all things new. He confesses, however, that he speaks of a mystery to be revealed in its fullness only when the last trumpet shall sound.

It is therefore not wrong to say, as do Barth and others, that the resurrection is not an historical event if by that it is meant that the resurrection is an event of the new order rather than the old, but in my view, this statement on its own gives inadequate recognition to the tangibility of Christ's presence as he walked on the road to Emmaus, and showed Thomas his wounds, and ate fish on the lake shore in Galilee. Somehow in the resurrection of Jesus, the new order intersects with the old, so that the creation as it is presently configured cannot any longer be thought to exclude the transforming presence of God. Creation that is to say, and history along with it, isn't quite what we thought it

was, where ‘we’ here means the citizens of the modern, western world. The tapestry of space and time is open textured. The creator continues his work with it, weaving in the threads of new life so that at the last we will see the creation brought to its full perfection and the glory of the Lord revealed.

This means that Barth doesn’t get at the whole truth by asserting that the resurrection is not an historical but an eschatological event, while Pannenberg, on the other hand, obscures the transformative character of the resurrection in insisting that it be investigated with the resources of the old order alone. The threads of the old order do not remain unmoved by this irruption of the new order—the stone is rolled away, the tomb is left empty and there is indeed someone present with the disciples in the room—but these threads do not disclose their meaning in and of themselves, not even within the broader context of Israel’s apocalyptic hope.³⁰ Flesh and blood can apprehend these alterations to the fabric of the old order—it can run to the tomb and see—but the revealing of the Truth here is in the Father’s gift, the gift we otherwise know as the Holy Spirit of God.

The question of the historicity of the resurrection has been the subject of recent debate between Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann. Pannenberg, on the one hand, insists on the historicity of the resurrection—it is a spatio-temporal event—whereas Moltmann, in *The Way of Jesus Christ*, contends that ‘Anyone who describes Christ’s resurrection as “historical”, in just the same way as his death on the cross, is overlooking the new creation with which the resurrection begins, and is falling short of the eschatological hope.’³¹ Moltmann is right that the resurrection is an event of the new order, and this means, against Pannenberg, that it eludes the grasp of historical-critical inquiry as it is presently undertaken. In Pannenberg’s favour, however, the resurrection is correctly described as historical, but only under a new *theological* description of what history is. Pannenberg comes close to recognising this when he writes,

In the case of the resurrection of Jesus, all Christians must realize that the facticity of the event will be contested right up till the eschatological consummation of the world

³⁰ Recall here the Barthian claim adduced in Chapter two: ‘Revelation is not a predicate of history, but history is a predicate of revelation.’

³¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans Margaret Kohl, (London: SCM Press, 1990) 214.

because its uniqueness transcends an understanding of reality that is oriented only to the passing world and because the new reality that has come in the resurrection of Jesus has not yet universally and definitively manifested itself.³²

Exactly! But this means, as Pannenberg does not himself appear to see, that a new description of history, and thus a new historiography is required, precisely on the basis of the resurrection itself. The old historiography, formulated by Ernst Troeltsch, and espoused still by many historical critics, is on this account inadequate to the reality of history itself.

Let me re-gather the argument as I have developed it so far. We began by recalling the observation commonly made that the New Testament record of Jesus' earthly career is profoundly shaped by its authors' belief that Jesus was raised from the dead. We then considered the claim that this renders the gospel records an unreliable source for the understanding of who Jesus really was [sic]. This matter has not been resolved yet, but by offering, as we have, an account of what kind of event the resurrection is, we are better placed now to consider whether it is true that resurrection faith obscures the figure of Jesus as he really was.

The claim that the true story of Jesus is the prerogative of historians to tell, rests upon the supposition that they know best what history really is, and that they have the appropriate tools to uncover what has happened in the past. The tools of historical-critical inquiry, however, such as were laid out by Troeltsch, presume concerning the past—presume, but cannot show—that God was not involved. Thus, the claim that resurrection faith falsifies the story of Jesus is not itself an historical-critical judgment but merely a reiteration of the presumption that the story of history can be told without reference to God. That is why Barth abandons the tools of history and has recourse to theology instead, and it is also why Pannenberg's reliance on these tools of historical inquiry simply will not do. What is needed rather is a re-consideration of the nature of history itself, and, in the first instance, an openness to the possibility that history is not a tightly woven causal continuum that is exclusive by definition of the operations of God. That in turn would allow for the possibility that the Jesus of history, rather than the

³² See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 360-1.

historians' Jesus, *is* the Christ of faith. Such openness would mean further that the gospel accounts of Jesus, shaped as they are by resurrection faith, are legitimately to be reckoned with as witness to the truth. Such openness is encouraged by Richard Niebuhr who asks, 'Might not the standpoint of the Christian community afford insight into the structure of concrete historical reality equal to, or even superior to, that given by the natural sciences?'³³

It remains possible, of course, that belief in the resurrection is mistaken and the perspective of the gospel writers does indeed mislead. Then it would be true, as Paul says, that Christian faith is in vain. My plea simply is that we recognise clearly what is at stake here. The resurrection, indeed the whole life of Jesus, cannot be examined as just another configuration of historical data in a world that otherwise remains unchanged. Francis Watson puts it thus: The life of Jesus is not a piece of history like any other, for this life, uniquely, is the act of God...'³⁴ And further, '...this is not one historical event among others but the particular history in which the goal and meaning of history is disclosed.'³⁵ The resurrection, on this account, is believed in or not as the inauguration of a newly ordered world—call it eschatological if you will—and as a reconfiguration of history itself under the impact of the redemptive and re-creative love of God. That is the claim to be examined, and not the question whether the resurrection can be found credible within a world-view determined by the presumption that God cannot be involved. We already know that the answer to the latter question is No!

III The Jesus of history is the Christ of faith.

It is the resurrection in particular, that confirms the history of Jesus—his conception and birth, his ministry, his death, his resurrection and ascension—as the *tevloV* and turning point of the world, and it is in the light of the resurrection therefore—retrospectively, that is to say—that the story of Jesus of Nazareth is told. As we have noted, however, this perspective of the New Testament writers is taken sometimes as a reason to doubt the

³³ Richard R. Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason: A Study of Theological Method* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957) 117.

³⁴ Francis Watson, 'The Quest for the Real Jesus' in Markus Bockmuehl (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 156-69, 160.

³⁵ Watson, 'The Quest for the Real Jesus', 165.

veracity of their reports. The New Testament writers present the ‘Christ of faith’ it is claimed, whereas historians set out to recover from behind the distorting and falsifying testimony of faith the ‘Jesus of history’ as he really was.³⁶ The alternative view—that of Christian faith—is that it is precisely in the light of the resurrection, and not otherwise, that the truth of Jesus’ history may be told. Here it is that Wolfhart Pannenberg’s work has been most helpful, not in supposing that the resurrection itself may be established by historical inquiry, but in explaining that the resurrection is the decisive clue to the understanding of who Jesus is. This does not simply mean, however, that the resurrection reveals what was true of Jesus anyway; the resurrection is itself constitutive of Jesus as the Messiah—constitutive of Jesus as the one in and through whom God brings about his new creation. Without the resurrection Jesus would not be this one, even were every other aspect of his career the same. Thus, says, Pannenberg,

The Easter event certainly shed a new light on the death of Jesus, on his earthly ministry, and therefore on his person. But that does not mean that even without the event of the resurrection these would have been what they are when seen in its light. We depreciate the Easter event if we construe it only as a disclosure or revelation of the meaning that the crucifixion and the earthly history of Jesus already had in themselves. Only the Easter event determines what the meaning was of the pre-Easter history of Jesus and who he was in relation to God.³⁷

This means, crucially for New Testament interpretation, and especially so for the so-called ‘Quest of the historical Jesus’, that we cannot decide upon who Jesus is simply on the basis of his career up to the point of his death and burial. If the resurrection merely *reveals* who Jesus is rather than belonging to the essence of who he is, then his reality as messiah, as prophet, as teacher, or even as the only-begotten Son of God who is of one being with the Father, would remain the same even were he not raised. That would entail,

³⁶ Graham Stanton explains in relation to this development that the gospels ‘were said to be so strongly stamped with the Easter faith of the early church that their value for the student of the life and teaching of Jesus was strictly limited.’ See Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 27. Stanton later reflects that while the gospels certainly are shaped by the Easter faith, ‘there is no need to insist that the early church was not interested in setting out the “past” of the life of Jesus.’ 29.

³⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 345.

in turn, that the truth of Jesus could be told without reference to the resurrection. It is precisely this assumption, however, and not resurrection faith, that obscures the reality of Jesus himself. Here again Pannenberg is right: Only in the light of the resurrection can it be seen that ‘the kingly rule of the Father was indeed present in Jesus’. Pannenberg explains:

The divine confirmation of Jesus in the Easter event extends also to his earthly ministry and on this basis to his proclamation of the divine rule and of its coming with himself. The implied claim of Jesus for his own person—namely, that the future of God is present in and by him—no longer seems to be human arrogance in the light of the Easter event. The resurrection of Jesus now gives confirmation that already in his earthly ministry he acted on the Father’s authority, so that the kingly rule of the Father was indeed present in him.³⁸

Here we see again the principle adduced earlier: it is in the light of what happens at the end that the true nature and content of the gospels’ story is revealed. Here, fundamentally, is why any hermeneutic of the New Testament and any Quest for the real Jesus, that does not begin with the resurrection is bound to fail in its goal of discovering the truth of who Jesus was and is.

IV The Resurrection as Centre and Goal of History

The centrality of the resurrection to Christian faith is famously remarked upon by the apostle Paul: ‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile...’ (1 Cor. 15:17). But the resurrection is not simply the centre of Christian faith; it is also the centre and the goal of creation and thus of history itself. It is in this sense that the resurrection of the crucified one is an eschatological event. The new life to which creation is directed and which was intended by God from the beginning is made present in Christ. The *telos* of history is

³⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 365. Despite Pannenberg’s attempt to justify it, it seems to me to be misleading rather than helpful to say, as he continues to do immediately after the cited passage, that Jesus is ‘instituted’ into sonship by the resurrection. The adoptionist overtones are not removed by Pannenberg’s claim that the institution has retroactive force.

manifest in the midst of time. As we have put the matter in chapter 3, the resurrection of the crucified Christ is the beginning and the condition of the transformation towards fulfilment of the whole of God's creation. To put it in Pauline language, Jesus Christ is both the one in and through whom all things are created and now also the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:16, 18). Through him God reveals his plan for the fullness of time (Eph. 1:10). 'The fullness of time' is an expression designating both the end of history and the gathering up of all time into the purpose of God. It refers to the *telos* of history as a whole. The resurrection, on this view, 'signals in advance the end of the story'.³⁹ All of this is illuminated by seeing it against the background of Jewish eschatological belief. According to Christopher Tuckett 'many Jews believed that the events of the end-time would include the resurrection of the dead.' Thus, Tuckett further explains, 'any claims that the events of Easter were a "resurrection" carried with them the implicit claim that the events of the end-time had already started. (This is indeed Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15:20ff.)'⁴⁰ As Jean Daniélou has put it in his book, *The Lord of History*:

He [Jesus Christ] is the culmination of the Old Testament, but also the First-born of the new creature; not only *ajrchv* and *tevloV*, alpha and omega, but also, from another point of view, the *tevloV---ajrch*, the end of one world and beginning of another, the turning point of history. This pattern is another of the distinguishing marks of a Christian theology of history. It is prefigured in the story of Noah, who represents both the judgement and destruction of the old world and the inauguration of a new. It is finally worked out in the mystery of the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, when the old world came to an end and the new creation was brought into being, both alike in the one divine person.⁴¹

Jesus Christ is to be understood, in virtue of his resurrection, as the one in whom history has its meaning and its goal, and through whom history itself is being brought to its

³⁹ I take the expression from Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World*, 291.

⁴⁰ Christopher Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament: Methods of Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1987) 46. See also Veselin Kesich, who writes, 'The message of Easter is that the end is already here, the Messiah has come. The new humanity has been inaugurated with his coming and resurrection.' Veselin Kesich, *The First Day of the New Creation: the Resurrection and the Christian Faith* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982) 37.

⁴¹ Jean Daniélou, *The Lord of History*, trans. Nigel Abercrombie, (London: Longmans, 1958) 195.

fulfilment. On this point modern theology owes a considerable debt to Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. More consistently than in *The Way of Jesus Christ*, Moltmann, in *Theology of Hope*, brings both the 'history-making' and the eschatological character of the resurrection to the fore. Earlier Dogmatics in the modern period had de-historicised the resurrection, being cowed by the historians' claims about what real history is, and had agreed, in consequence, that the resurrection is an event somehow distinct from history. Even Barth capitulated to this view by insisting, as we have seen, that the resurrection is not an historical event. Moltmann, however, preserves both aspects of the matter, the historical and the eschatological. The resurrection is to be regarded, Moltmann writes, 'as a "history-making event" in the light of which all other history is illumined, called in question and transformed.'⁴² And further:

The raising of Christ is then to be called 'historic' not because it took place *in* the history to which other categories of some sort provide a key [cf. the categories of Troeltsch], but it is to be called historic because, by pointing the way for future events, it *makes* history in which we can and must live. It is historic because it discloses an eschatological future.⁴³

The future to which the whole of history is directed is revealed in the crucified and risen Christ to be the transformation of creation and new life in communion with God. That is the *telos* of history and the context in which the whole of our life now is to be lived and understood. The author of 1st Peter can thus write, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...' (1 Pet. 1:3). Christian life is lived in hope, a hope grounded in the resurrection of Christ—but it is, as yet, 'hope'. The resurrection provides a foretaste of what is not completed yet. There is more yet to be said and done, before God will be all in all. Here again we must take issue with Barth, who recognises that the resurrection is *the* centre and meaning of history but articulates this in such a way that the future is collapsed into the resurrection. 'Nothing which will

⁴² Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967) 180.

⁴³ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 181.

be', Barth says, 'has not already taken place on Easter day'.⁴⁴ This formulation points to the resurrection as the centre and goal of all history, and yet, paradoxically, renders of no account all subsequent historical life. Barth's pneumatological weakness is evident again here, I suspect. For it is the Spirit who unites us with Christ and enables our life now to be a participation in the making of history. The history that we now live matters because if lived in the power of the Spirit, or not, it is gathered, or not, into that final consummation of all things that is the kingdom of God. Barth, to my mind, does not allow sufficient space for the historic character of all human action. We must rather say, along with Gerald O'Collins, that 'the goal of the resurrection is nothing less than that of moving the whole of creation to participate as fully as possible in the life of God.'⁴⁵ 'Participation' here does not take place whether we like it or not, as one sometimes suspects with Barth, but as we are enabled by the Spirit to respond to the risen Christ in faith and in hope.

V Something About Epistemology

Although it will be considered more extensively elsewhere in the book, it is necessary to say something briefly here about epistemology. The claim that the resurrection is the centre and goal of all history is a claim of faith. I have denied that this truth of the resurrection gives itself up to the interrogations of an allegedly faith-free historical-critical inquiry. So how then can this truth be known? My basic answer is, 'by faith', but we have Pannenberg to contend with here who says that

if... historical study declares itself unable to establish what 'really' happened on Easter, then all the more, faith is not able to do so; for faith cannot ascertain anything certain about events of the past that would perhaps be inaccessible to the historian.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Barth, CD, III.2, 489.

⁴⁵ Gerald O'Collins, 'The Resurrection: The State of the Questions' in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins, SJ, (eds) *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 5-28, 23.

⁴⁶ Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 109.

Pannenberg's assertion must be countered by considering what is designated by the phrase, what 'really' happened. I suspect that Pannenberg, along with all those who stand in the tradition of Leopold von Ranke's quest for history *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (as it really was), mean something like what the video camera might have recorded had there been one present. But this is naïve. If what really happened is that God raised Jesus from the dead, what photographic evidence could be supposed to verify that fact? Suppose that CCTV was hidden in the tomb, and that the transition from dead body to empty grave clothes was captured on film. What evidence could possibly have been recorded that would establish God as the agent of this event? Even if the event were recordable by this method, any number of interpretations might be and have been offered. One well known interpretation has it that Jesus didn't really die but was simply revived in the tomb. When his strength was sufficiently restored, he simply got up and left. Could a video camera distinguish that occurrence from the Christian account of the matter? Quite possibly not. Other factors must therefore be brought into play if we are to 'discern' what really happened, and those other factors are matters of faith, the faith that the risen Christ has appeared to the disciples and to us, for example; or, on the other side, the faith that reality is configured in such a way that precludes resurrection from the dead, the faith that the events of history conform without exception to the patterns of immanent causality, or indeed the faith that human epistemic resources are sufficient to the task of revealing all truth. These are competing frameworks of meaning and truth that cannot be excluded from our apprehension of what 'really' happened, but which yield radically different accounts of what took place. An account needs to be given, therefore, of how we come to know that Jesus has been raised from the dead. This includes, I shall argue, a role for faith in discerning what has taken place in history.

Faith itself is a relation. It is not a matter of gritting one's teeth and believing what cannot be proven, but rather of being drawn into relation with God through the mediation of his Son and Spirit. In this sense the risen Christ is the agent of his own revelation. He is the one who in the power of the Spirit and sent by the Father, discloses himself to us as the risen one. This is precisely what happens in the apostolic apprehension of the risen Christ. We could trace this through the various gospel accounts, but the Lukan story of the resurrection illuminates the matter particularly well.

Luke's account of the resurrection begins as it does in all four gospels with the discovery of the empty tomb.

On the first day of the week [the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee (Lk 23:55)] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living amongst the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to the rest. (Luke 24:1-9)

Much has been written about how improbable it would have been at the time the gospels were written to rest a fabricated narrative on the authority of women. N.T. Wright for example cites Josephus on the law of witnesses: 'From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex'.⁴⁷ Luke, in contrast, strengthens the authority of the women's witness by his mention of the women at two previous stages of the unfolding drama. They 'followed' Jesus as he made his way to Calvary. Luke highlights their presence by having Jesus single the women out from the crowd in order to address them. An extended discourse ends with the words that the women should not weep for him but for themselves (Lk. 23:27-31). The women we are thus told were present at Jesus' passion; they saw Jesus die. That is important because it has subsequently been suggested that Jesus did not die but merely fainted and was later resuscitated. Luke insists, however, that the women saw Jesus die. What is more, they followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb and were witnesses of the burial. Luke reports that 'The women who had come with him from Galilee'—who were not prone to have mistaken Jesus' identity therefore—'followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body

⁴⁷ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 607-8, note 55. The quote from Josephus comes from *Antiquities*, 4.219.

was laid.’ (Lk. 23:55). Luke’s careful attention to the women as witnesses to the death, to the burial and eventually to the empty tomb is not simply incidental. It is a deliberate emphasis upon the body of Jesus. Resurrection is not merely about what happened to the disciples, a revival of faith after Jesus’ death. Resurrection is about what happened to Jesus, and this means, for Luke, what happened to Jesus’ body. This series of events, including the resurrection, has an historical reference. It is about what has taken place in time and space, and is not merely something in the minds of his followers.

I am not suggesting here that just because the Bible says so, this settles the matter of whether or not Jesus underwent some sort of bodily resurrection. My point rather, is that whether or not there are aspects of the resurrection beyond the scope of historical inquiry, Luke means us to understand that in at least one important respect the resurrection is an event on the same plane of history as the crucifixion. Luke did not think that he was writing in the genre of myth.

Let us look further at how Luke emphasises the material and historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus. The women who saw Jesus crucified and saw his body laid in the tomb went again to the tomb on the first day of the week, taking with them the spices they had prepared. When they got there, however, they reportedly found the stone rolled away. They entered the tomb and found that the body was gone. At this stage the women are said to be perplexed. Seeing his tomb empty does not of itself entail that Jesus had been raised. Taken by itself, the reality of the empty tomb is simply perplexing and can lead to a range of different interpretations. One such interpretation is clearly acknowledged in Matthew’s recognition that a stolen body could equally account for the tomb being empty (Mtt. 28:13).

Two men then appear who ask the women, ‘why do you seek the living among the dead?’ The men mildly rebuke the women for not remembering that Jesus had spoken of his death and had promised that he would rise from the dead. The women then went and told all this to the other disciples. The word *e[legon]* used at Luke 24:10 is the imperfect indicative active form of the verb and indicates that the women do not simply tell once, but rather that they went on telling. They kept repeating their story.⁴⁸ One can well

⁴⁸ Thus Fitzmyer translates: ‘they and the others *kept repeating* these things to the apostles’ (my emphasis) Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1983) 1532.

imagine that the news was greeted with disbelief and so had to be repeated again and again. We can imagine too that every last detail was inquired after and clarified through incessant questioning. Disbelief is the most natural immediate reaction. What the women are saying is very much out of the ordinary. It is something much harder to swallow than the relatively inoffensive suggestion that Jesus' influence will somehow carry on. Thus in verse 11 we read that the words of the women seemed to the disciples to be an idle tale, and they did not believe them. Luke makes no attempt to disguise the fact that what he is trying to tell us is very hard to believe.

At this stage of the narrative it is not yet clear that anyone believes that Jesus is alive, including the women themselves. They were simply amazed at the sequence of events and, as yet, as far as we can tell, they do not know what to make of it. Peter, who rushed to the tomb as soon as he had heard the women's testimony, is also reported to have been amazed (Lk. 24:12) but, again, his sighting of the empty tomb is not enough on its own to convince him that Jesus has been raised.

This uncertainty in the face of the empty tomb, an event easily verifiable by eye-witnesses but by no means easily understood, is borne out by the subsequent story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They have heard the women's story and convey it to the stranger whom they meet on the road: 'Some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive' (Lk. 24:22-3). Clearly, however, this testimony is not yet convincing. The two disciples, far from being jubilant at Jesus' resurrection, are still sorrowing over his death (vs. 17). They are clearly unsure what to make of the women's testimony. Luke again makes it clear that what he is trying to tell us is not easy to believe. It is something much more momentous than a renewal of faith in the disciples. Of crucial importance here is that, on Luke's account, the resurrection of Jesus is an event that is *independent* of a renewal of faith in the disciples. Jesus is risen, but even though they have the evidence of

something accessible to (their)⁴⁹ historical reason—the empty tomb—none of the disciples can yet believe it.

What then does generate belief? Luke has set this up very carefully, and here we come to the crucial point. It is encounter with the risen Lord himself. The testimony of the women is not enough on its own. Nor is the evidence of the empty tomb. Rather, it was the appearance of Jesus in person that led to the disciples' belief. For the two disciples who had gone to Emmaus, it was the breaking of bread—the evidence establishing a continuity between the risen one and the one who had died—that convinced them that Jesus was alive in their presence. When those two disciples rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the others, they were greeted with the news that in the meantime Jesus had also appeared to Simon, thus enabling the Jerusalem group also to say, 'The Lord has risen indeed' (Lk. 24:34). There had been evidence available earlier, but only through encounter with the risen Jesus himself were the disciples able to understand what the evidence entailed. Luke's purpose here seems to be to insist that the resurrection has at least some of the characteristics of an historical event and that it happens independently of the beliefs of the first disciples. It is not a story that was fabricated in consequence of a renewal of the disciple's faith, but explains rather why that faith was renewed. Faith is not to be understood therefore as an epistemic tool already in the possession of the disciples. It is engendered rather by the presence of the risen Christ himself. It is Christ's giving of himself in the power of the Spirit, therefore, and the relation of faith established by that action that enables the disciples to know the truth.

As the Emmaus disciples recount their story to the others, Jesus appears once again in their midst. At this point Luke contends with another possible reaction to the news of the resurrection. Some of the disciples apparently thought that they were seeing a ghost (Lk. 24:37) Why does Luke mention this? It is because he wants to refute the view that the resurrection appearances were merely visions, or even illusions. For the same reason he goes on to report that Jesus offers his hands and his side so that the disciples could touch him. Furthermore, Jesus asks the disciples for something to eat. They give him a piece of fish, and Jesus, Luke reports, ate it in their presence. It is true, apparently,

⁴⁹ It is not a straightforward matter for subsequent generations to verify that Jesus' body had gone from the tomb in which it had been laid, but if the disciples, or anyone else in Jerusalem at the time, wanted to see for themselves the reality to which the women testified, they could surely do so.

that the appearance of Jesus can seem like a spirit or ghost, but the difference is stated in the most emphatic terms.

What is apparent here is that Luke deliberately counters the view that these stories are only mythical fabrications. The resurrection is not the product of the disciples' faith or wishful thinking as some would allege, but rather the very basis upon which that faith is founded. Luke openly acknowledges that it is very difficult to believe what he is trying to tell us. He also acknowledges that alternative explanations will be sought, but he particularly emphasises that the resurrection of Jesus is to be understood as something that happened to Jesus independently of the disciples' faith, that it is to be understood as involving some sort of physical body, and that it takes place on the same terrain of historical occurrence that historians typically investigate. What will not do, however, is the prevailing assumption of secular historiography that that same terrain cannot be the locus of the action of God. We must also insist, on the evidence of Luke's gospel at least, that the New Testament writers did not think that they were engaging in the genre of myth. They intended their witness to refer to things that have taken place. Should we moderns choose to understand their testimony as myth, we are not preserving the essence of their gospel while abandoning a supposedly naïve cosmology; we are falsifying what they intended to say. Allegations of a naïve or primitive cosmology cannot be allowed as an excuse for the semantic vandalism involved in the modern dehistoricising of the New Testament accounts. In the matter of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the first hearer's of that news were, on Luke's account at least, no less disbelieving than we. Their world-view was called into question just as is ours. The news of the resurrection, as Luke presents it, is either to be rejected, or it calls for a new conception of history and of God's involvement in our world.