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Gospel Narrative, Miracles, and the "Critical" Reader

The Eclipse of the Supernatural: Case Studies in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics

The European Enlightenment and the nineteenth century were formative periods for modern biblical criticism, and are rightly associated with the rise of sceptical perspectives on the supernatural dimension of the Bible. This article argues for the persistence of pre-critical, theologically conditioned assumptions in the hermeneutical procedures of two influential writers on the subject of miracles in the Gospels: Thomas Woolston and David Friedrich Strauss. Their work helped to revive a theological tradition of non-realistic interpretation of biblical narrative which runs from Origen of Alexandria to Rudolf Bultmann and beyond.

Reception history is concerned, among other things, with the methods and interpretive tendencies that historically situated readers bring to biblical texts. One of the questions which has preoccupied scholars in

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recent times,[1] evidenced by this special edition, is the nature and origins of "critical" biblical hermeneutics and its relationship with "pre-critical" modes of understanding.[2] Reaching agreement on what constitutes a critical stance in biblical studies is not easy, in part because it concerns a collection of texts which for many readers is inextricably associated with the truth claims of at least two of the world's major religions. And when dealing with texts of religious significance, the philosophical and theological presuppositions of readers tend to impact on their judgements. Perhaps such presumptions influence all hermeneutics, but it seems more explicit in biblical hermeneutics, and it is especially noticeable in the way readers understand the supernatural dimension of the Bible.

The issue of miracles has never been without controversy among readers of the Bible, but it became a dominant preoccupation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sometimes serving as a litmus test for critical interpretation of the Bible in the academy and for theological orthodoxy in the Church.[3] For the purposes of this article, we can leave the precise definition of theological orthodoxy to one side, but what exactly is "biblical criticism" (that is to say, a critical approach to biblical texts)?

The general character of biblical criticism is contested, like almost everything else in the discipline. In the first section of this article I will draw, critically but sympathetically, from two different (but potentially complementary) conceptions of the critical enterprise and its theological-hermeneutical consequences: one proposed by the contemporary Hebrew Bible scholar John Barton,[4] and one implicit in, if not formally proposed by, the work

[1] The relationship between the so-called "critical" and "pre-critical" has long preoccupied theologically engaged historians of hermeneutics; see, for instance, Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004). I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers whose constructive criticism greatly assisted with the development of this article. I would also like to thank Prof. Halvor Moxnes and Dr. Fatima Tofighi, whose hospitality and friendship made it possible.

[2] Having noted the contested nature of the terms "critical" and "criticism," I will generally avoid the potential blizzard of inverted commas for the rest of this article, except when I judge that emphasis requires them.

[3] For a book length study, see Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

[4] See John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

of the twentieth-century theologian and intellectual historian Hans Frei.[5] My choice of these models is governed, in no small part, by the considerable thought that both these writers have given to the formative centuries of modern biblical scholarship: the periodic context for the present discussion.

The model I am working with presupposes a distinction between "biblical criticism" and "biblical studies." I understand the latter to be a wider field of critical scholarship, which includes such disciplines as reception history (intellectual, socio-cultural and political), reception theory, biblical pedagogy, and the general historiography of biblical interpretation. There are those who insist on the importance of ideological criticism as part of an ongoing critique of the working assumptions of biblical criticism. This kind of enquiry is vitally important to biblical studies in all its fullness,[6] and, in so far as self-conscious reflection on our own ideological setting informs our judgements when reading and studying primary biblical texts then this is also included in my account. But the concept of biblical criticism adopted here consists of a range of scholarly practises which may be more or less prominent in different works of criticism:[7] core elements include literary discernment and explanatory hypotheses (focusing on such matters as composition and source), philological enquiry, linguistic analysis,[8] historical (social, political and cultural) contextualisation and reconstruction (from all manner of theoretical perspectives).[9] This family of practices has become dominant

[5] The key text here is Frei, *Eclipse*.

[6] The work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and James G. Crossley are exemplary in this respect: see, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2000) and *Democratising Biblical Studies: Towards an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century* (London: Equinox, 2008) and *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology* (London: Equinox, 2012).

[7] The model is analogous to Ninian Smart's "dimension of religion" approach to identifying that illusive and nebulous phenomenon: see *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1–25.

[8] On the development and use of these approaches, see Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), especially chaps 3 and 4; and Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially chaps, 1, 3, and 5; David Jasper, "Literary Readings of the Bible," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21–43.

[9] See John Barton, "Historical-Critical Approaches," in Barton, *Companion*, 9–20; Keith W. Whitelam, "The Social World of the Bible," in Barton, *Companion*, 35–40; Robert P. Carroll, "Poststructuralist Approaches, New Historicism and Postmodernism," in Barton, *Companion*, 50–66; David M. Carr and Colleen M. Conway, *Introduction to the Bible: Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and*

in Western intellectual culture since the Enlightenment (although they did not begin there). They rose to prominence in a European intellectual context, when it was becoming increasingly clear for many educated readers of the Bible that the sacred text of their civilisation could no longer provide the definitive narrative into which the sum of human knowledge could be subsumed. In response to (or alongside of) this realisation, some of those same readers thought it right and just that the Bible be studied like other works of literature, and as a *candidate* source for knowledge and spiritual insight, without default theological privilege. In practice, theological privilege was rarely withdrawn in its entirety, and theological privilege continues to co-exist with those aforementioned markers of criticism, to the chagrin of some and the satisfaction of others.[10]

In the second section of the article I will show how features of the aforementioned conception of biblical criticism found expression in the work of two influential analysts of miracles during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the reputed "deist" pamphleteer Thomas Woolston, and one of the giants of historical Jesus studies, David Friedrich Strauss. Both writers heralded the modern eclipse of a realistic, literal and historical understanding of Gospel narratives attended by miracles (indicative of Frei's account of criticism, which emphasises the historical-critical method), by making judgements about the kind of writings the Gospels actually are (indicative of Barton's account of criticism, which emphasises the literary dimension).

Beyond showing how Woolston and Strauss typify a combination of Barton and Frei's notions of biblical criticism, I will argue that both these figures continued to be indebted to traditions and assumptions that could be regarded as uncritical (or pre-critical) when judged against Barton and Frei's proposed standards. Woolston relies on the legacy of the ancient and medieval *Quadriga*,[11] with an emphatic preference for the spiritual / figurative

Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament, Bible in the Modern World 12 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006).

[10] See Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?*, 2nd ed. (London: T & T Clark International, 2004); and Francis B. Watson, "Bible, Theology and the University: A Response to Philip Davies," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21, no. 71 (1996): 3–16. More recently, there is the collection by Roland Boer, *Secularism and Biblical Studies* (London: Equinox, 2010); and an edition of the *Journal of Historical Jesus Studies* (vol. 9, no. 1, 2011), edited by Mark Allen Powell, devoted to the topic of Evangelical Christians and historical Jesus studies.

[11] For a classic summary and defence of the fourfold sense, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (Allen: Christian Classics—Thomas More, 1948), pt. 1, q. 1. art. 10.

senses over the literal: allegorical, moral and anagogical.[12] Indeed, I will argue that the great 'blasphemer' Woolston continued to see miracles in the Gospels as providing prophetic typologies for the future of Christendom, and, as such, is more orientated towards theological (especially soteriological) truth than one might expect from anyone who conformed to the standards of critical scholarship as defined by either Barton or Frei: "I am for the spiritual *Jesus* and *Messiah*," writes Woolston, "who cures the worse Distempers of the Soul, and does other mysterious and most miraculous Works, of which those recorded in the Evangelists, are but Figure and Parable."[13]

Strauss also uses a figurative method of analysis, which presupposes a level of intimacy and dependency between the Old and New Testament canons which would be more at home in a Christian theological tradition of hermeneutics of the kind he was (understandably) thought to be repudiating: the kind which, in the words of Frei, turned "the variety of biblical books into a single, unitary canon," and with the Bible as a single completed book with "Christ as the subject matter of both testaments."[14] At a more fundamental philosophical level, Strauss's approach to miracles is conditioned by theological and philosophical assumptions which are by no means a given for the modern critic, and which might be seen as an unwarranted encroachment on the independence of *Geschichtswissenschaft* (historical science). In fact, in so far as "deism" is operative in the biblical hermeneutics of the writers discussed here,[15] it is to be found in the early work of Strauss rather than Wool-

[12] The key texts are collected in Thomas Woolston, *Six Discourses on the Miracles of Our Saviour and Defences of His Discourses, 1727–1730* (New York: Garland, 1979), and I will quote from this edition throughout. Woolston does not use the three spiritual senses in a precise or systematic way. Indeed, he sometimes takes "spiritual senses" as if they constituted a separate category to the more basic "allegorical" (ibid., 22). On other occasions, he seems to prefer "Type and Figure" (ibid., 10) or "prophetical and parabolic" (50) as catch-all phrases for the non-literal (and therefore correct) reading of the Gospels.

[13] Ibid., 61.

[14] Frei, *Eclipse*, 2, 47.

[15] Deism, especially within the context of the English Enlightenment, has often been taken to be an important theological standpoint for the development of modern biblical scholarship, especially its more sceptical tendencies. One need only look at the coverage given to that context in some major publications in this area from the late twentieth century such as Henning Graf Reventlow, *Bibelautorität und Geist der Moderne: die Bedeutung des Bibelverständnisses für die geistesgeschichtliche und politische Entwicklung in England von der Reformation bis zur Aufklärung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980). William Baird explicitly takes deism as the historical point of departure in his *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 1: *From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); more recently, reputed "deists" feature in Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 63–78.

ston. In both cases, however, it was the mishmash of literary, historical and theological tendencies which helped to produce the epoch making radicalism of their interventions in early modern biblical studies. This intervention helped to sustain a tradition of non-realistic, historically agnostic (if not outright sceptical) interpretation of biblical narrative, which runs from Origen (c. 184–254 CE) to Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) and beyond.[16] Strauss speaks for this tradition when he writes of the responsibility of the theologian to expound on the particular *mythus* of Jesus's miraculous deeds with a view to communicating their universal meaning for the faithful: "In his discourses to the Church, he will indeed adhere to the forms of the popular conception, but on every opportunity he will exhibit their spiritual significance which to him constitutes their own sole truth."[17]

Biblical Criticism

For practical purposes, biblical scholars seem able to identify critical approaches to the Bible when they encounter them: intuitively distinguishing between devotional readings of the Bible as Scripture, and the work of the scholar asking questions about genre, semantics, the socio-political context of texts, redaction—in short, the kind of questions asked by scholars working with other canons of literature. The radical Irish writer John Toland (1670–1722)—another of the so-called "deists," and a significant figure in biblical

[16] Some of the key texts from Origen are *De principiis*, trans. Frederick Crombie, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4 (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885); and *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958). Bultmann's approach is articulated in various places, and has been subjected to wide ranging criticism; the collection that kick-started this ongoing appraisal is Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1953). Some of those influenced by the form criticism associated with Bultmann have also shown an affinity with his recasting of historical fictions as a form of theological presentism (if not the explicit existentialism of the German scholar): take, for example, John Dominic Crossan's pronouncement on the encounter between the risen Christ and his disciples on the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24, "Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens" (*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), xiii).

[17] David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. and trans. George Eliot (1840; New York: Cosmo Classics, 2009), 783. I will draw from this classic translation of the German fourth edition, since Strauss returned to the consistently mythical approach for this book, having experimented with more conventional, rationalist biographies following the (very) critical responses he received to his first edition.

scholarship and the apocrypha in the early Enlightenment[18]—counselled his readers to "read the sacred Writings with that Equity and Attention that is due to meer Humane works: Nor is there any different rule to be follow'd in the Interpretation of Scripture from what is common to all other books."[19] As a concise definition of biblical criticism, one could do worse than stick with this offering from the eighteenth century. For example, when we are dealing with narrative portions of the Bible we would resist claims for straight forward correspondence between biblical stories and historical fact, unless such narratives can be judged plausible by the standards of modern historical enquiry: the standards we would apply to "meer Human works." In practice, however, the way scholars understand and apply the methods of history, and what they judge to be plausible, varies considerably.[20] And given the plurality of books in the Bible, we will surely need a plurality of rules for the different varieties of literature within the canon. Then there is the question of whether the Bible remains to be explored as an artefact in its own right once all its constituent parts have been considered.[21] When it comes to offering a systematic distillation of the nature of the "critical" in "biblical criticism," it

[18] For a book length study of Toland's controversial career in European letters, see Justin Champion, *Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture, 1696–1722* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). On his forays into the apocrypha see my own "Cracking the Canon: John Toland, 'Lost' Gospels, and the Challenge to Religious Hegemony," in *Looking Through a Glass Bible: Postdisciplinary Biblical Interpretations from the Glasgow School*, ed. A. K. M. Adam and Samuel Tongue (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 85–112.

[19] John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious: or, A Treatise Shewing that There is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above It* (London, 1696), 49.

[20] When N. T. Wright published *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3: The Resurrection of the Son of God (London: SPCK, 2003), the book was the catalyst for a whole issue of the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (vol. 3, n. 2, 2005). The issue was devoted to the subject of resurrection and its relationship to Christian origins, and the question of what constitutes reasonable historical conjecture was a consistent theme.

[21] This is especially pertinent for those for whom the Bible remains sacred Scripture, and demands an interconnected appreciation on intellectual and theological grounds. An antagonistic reaction against a perceived fragmentation of the Bible—as a consequence of historical criticism—was one of the drivers for the rise or return of canonical approaches to the Bible in the academy, represented by the late Brevard S. Childs in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), and carrying on into more recent times with Francis B. Watson, *Text Church and Word: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), idem., *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); and R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For Barton, biblical criticism (historical or otherwise) is an "essential pre-condition" for canonical approaches (*Biblical Criticism*, 5).

faces many of the same problems as other intellectual disciplines attempting to demarcate their modus operandi.[22]

Despite the challenge of defining critical reading, the discipline does not want for candidate proposals. There are those such as Barton who emphasise the literary and linguistic dimensions of biblical criticism, and tend towards a synchronic understanding; and those such as Frei who have emphasised the historical-critical dimension, and tend toward a diachronic understanding. For both these writers, criticism has implications for the way one engages with the truth / authority of the Bible. In Barton, the question of truth is bracketed and (presumably) becomes part of an independent theological enquiry which the biblical critic may or may not choose to participate in;[23] in the case of Frei, the truth need not be bracketed by the critic, but the effects of historical criticism are such that the truth or authority of the Bible becomes detached from its narrative content.[24] As we will see, the work of Woolston and Strauss cuts across these definitional boundaries of "the critical."

There is a strong tendency to associate the rise of biblical criticism with the European Enlightenment, broadly conceived to include many of the intellectual developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[25] One of the most famous critical enterprises to emerge in this period, one closely related to the subject of this article, is the so-called quest for the historical Jesus. This is a good test case of that willingness to question the correspondence between narrative and history in a manner comparable to other enquiries into persons and texts of the ancient world. The historical study of

[22] The problem has been experienced in the most robust of all forms of modern enquiry: the natural sciences. The question of what exactly defines science over against non-science (or pseudo-science) is a mainstay in the history and philosophy of the discipline. Two famous twentieth-century suggestions, both still contenders, are the capacity for "falsification" and the characteristic of "puzzle solving"; on the former, see Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1962); on the latter, see Thomas Kuhn, "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research?," in *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, ed. P. A. Schilpp, vol. XIV, Book II (La Salle: Open Court, 1974), 798–819.

[23] Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 27, 6.

[24] This is central to the whole argument of Frei's *Eclipse*.

[25] See, for example, William Baird, "Bible Criticism: New Testament Criticism," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 730–736; Anthony C. Thisleton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 138–42. These essays follow the contours of standard works in the field such Reventlow's *Bibelautorität und Geist der Moderne*. For a more recent, and in many ways more radical thesis on the influence of the Enlightenment, see Moore and Sherwood, *Biblical Scholar*, especially chap. 2.

Jesus is often presented as unfolding in discrete historical episodes of noteworthy activity beginning in the late eighteenth century.[26] This is, at best, an oversimplification, and it is a construction that has been unravelling in recent historiography.[27] In fact, historical questions about the life of Jesus have been a feature of intellectual history since antiquity: the Greek philosopher Celsus threw down the gauntlet on historical veracity in the second century,[28] and Origen of Alexandria duly took up the challenge.[29] Many of Celsus's preoccupations about the life of Jesus, especially his miracles and his relationship to Judaism,[30] resurfaced in the early modern period, while some of Origen's responses were similarly recycled. And in the case of one of the scholars I will be discussing below (Woolston), the interpretive and rhetorical styles of both Celsus and Origen found expression in the very same works of criticism.[31]

[26] Albert Schweitzer was the principal architect of this "peaks and troughs" analysis. According to Schweitzer, before Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), "no one had attempted to form a historical conception of the life of Jesus" (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (1906; London: A & C Black, 1910), 13).

[27] I have proposed a revision of the early phase of the Quest in "The Road to Reimarus: Origins of the Quest for the Historical Jesus," in *Holy Land as Homeland? Models for Constructing the Historic Landscapes of Jesus*, ed. Keith W. Whitelam (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011), 19–47. For a critical account of the three quest model (popularised if not invented by N. T. Wright), which takes the history of scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth century into account, see Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, "The Fiction of the 'Three Quests': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Historical Paradigm," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 7, no. 3 (2009): 211–53; and for an essay which brings together a number of recent criticisms to repudiate the three quest model in favour of a culturally contextual approach, see Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism*, 1–18. Halvor Moxnes employs an ideologically contextual approach for the nineteenth century in *Jesus and The Rise of Nationalism: A New Quest for the Nineteenth Century Jesus* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

[28] The work of the Greek philosopher Celsus, Λόγος Ἀληθής (*The True Word*, ca. 177 CE), is among the earliest surviving pieces of anti-Christian polemic. Celsus's attack on the theological authority of Jesus has much in common with scepticism during and beyond the Enlightenment, with incredulity at the miracles and an indictment of the Jewish tradition from which Christianity emerged. The text has been reconstructed from the substantial quotations in Origen's rebuttal *Contra Celsum* (248 CE): see Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[29] See Origen, *Contra Celsum*.

[30] On Judaism and Greco-Roman religion, see Celsus, *True Doctrine*, 53–75; on miracles, specifically the Resurrection, see 106–14.

[31] They include, on the one hand Celsus's use of irony, sarcasm, and the appeal to "Jewish rabbis" as the source for damning indictments of the literal sense of the Gospels; and on the other, Origen's liberal use of allegory. For studies of the rhetorical and hermeneutical methods

Given these historical precedents, I am sympathetic to Barton's view that the practice of criticism cuts across the history of biblical hermeneutics.[32] Although for Barton, Historical Jesus studies is not paradigmatic: biblical criticism is first and foremost a "linguistic and literary operation"[33] at the service of elucidating the "plain meaning" of a text. Barton acknowledges that pursuit of the "plain meaning" may appear an "anodyne" conception of the critical enterprise,[34] and I certainly would not want to make it the centre point of my conception.[35] On the other hand, it seems undeniable that elucidating the meaning of a text based on "a concern for the kind of text that is being read" with an "awareness of what questions it is appropriate to ask of it" is a consistent feature of much which has passed for thoughtful and enduring biblical scholarship,[36] from ancient to modern times. Even if we grant this continuity, however, there is at least one important difference between the work of the pre-modern biblical critics mentioned above and the general model of hermeneutics that Barton proposes as emblematic of criticism: neither Celsus (a sceptic and polemicist) nor Origen (a Christian theologian) "bracketed out" the question of truth when analysing texts.[37] For Barton, the truth of a text is secondary to the primary critical function of understanding: understanding rather than "advocacy" or apologetics is Barton's preferred model of biblical criticism. On the other hand, Barton is keen to emphasise that criticism is "not inimical to liturgical or devotional use of the Bible."[38] On this analysis, then, in a pre-modern context, prior

of Woolston (especially in his *Discourses*), see chap. 4 of James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680–1750* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997) and Roger D. Lund, "Irony as Subversion: Thomas Woolston and the Crime of Wit," in *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response (1660–1750)*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 170–94.

[32] One conception of the essential nature of critical biblical studies, discussed but rejected by Barton, revolves around the detection of "Difficulties in the Text," the theme of chap. 2 of *Biblical Criticism*. Celsus, Origen (and many of the Church fathers) were critical in this sense. Whereas I have suggested Celsus and Origen exhibited such critical tendencies, Barton suggests Julius Africanus (131–32).

[33] Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 25, 30.

[34] Ibid., 3. He makes his full case for this part of the thesis in chap. 6, especially 101–16.

[35] There is no space for a sustained critique of it here, but I am not convinced that the "plain sense" can be easily distinguished from Barton's discarded "original," "intended," "historical," or "literal" senses (see ibid., 69–101).

[36] Ibid., 30.

[37] Ibid., 27.

[38] Ibid., 6.

to the disciplinary compartmentalisations we take for granted, it is not at all surprising that critical and devotional readings (or any "committed" reading, sceptical or apologetic) often co-existed within the very same works of biblical interpretation. Nor is it surprising that such co-existence has been maintained: as Peter Gay argued in his classic study of the Enlightenment, many of the cutting edge developments in textual and historiographical study in early modernity were produced in service of Christian theology.[39]

Barton may well have a point that there is a tendency among biblical scholars to overestimate the *historical* nature of criticism: a tendency manifest, perhaps, in my own inclination to see the quest for the historical Jesus as a classic instance. As noted already, Barton argues that biblical criticism is primarily a "literary operation," and that even much historical work on the Bible has its roots in literary discernments.[40] But even if criticism as a general enterprise in the humanities is essentially literary, and only accidentally historical, there is no escaping the fact that the Bible is a body of literature composed within the context of the Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman world, reflecting the manners, customers and values of those times, written in the languages and literary forms of those times. As such, within the context of *biblical* criticism, the historical and the literary are not easily prised apart. And even if we keep the literary and diachronic emphasis for the moment, a question remains: What lead an increasing number of educated readers in a predominantly Christian culture to approach the texts of the Bible in the same way that an educated reader might approach, say, the works of Aristophanes? The Swiss theologian and biblical scholar Jean LeClerc (1657–1736) is reported to have done precisely that, much to the surprise of a young scholar who would later develop his own rather more infamous *hermeneutica profana* in relation to the Bible: Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768).[41] To explain the increasing adoption of such a criti-

[39] "In the latter half of the seventeenth century and early in the eighteenth an army of scholarly theologians employed the delicate and potent critical instruments developed in the Renaissance to advance the historical study and demonstrate the historical truth of the Christian religion. Learned Benedictines, Jesuits and Anglicans refined the canons of criticism, radically improved paleography, developed numismatics, gathered vast collections of documents. These historians confronted their task with absolute honesty and devout industry—an industry never surpassed and rarely matched by the philosophes" (Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 1. The Rise of Modern Paganism (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 359).

[40] See Barton on the achievements of Julius Wellhausen (*Biblical Criticism*, 35).

[41] This was the observation of the young and impressionable Reimarus, who was initially

cal stance, some have argued not merely for a modern expansion, refinement and democratisation of an established tradition of literary and linguistic sensitivity, but for a radical paradigm shift in the early modern era, and it is to this argument we now turn.

For those seeking for detailed historical investigations into the conditions which facilitated the rise of modern biblical criticism, the work of Klaus Scholder and Henning Graf Reventlow have probably yet to be surpassed.[42] In terms of chronicling the renegotiation of the place of the Bible in Western thought and culture, Jonathan Sheehan's more recent award-winning study illuminates the ashes of biblical authority as the fires of criticism swept through the canon in eighteenth-century Europe.[43] What Hans Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* lacks in historical detail and cultural analysis, however, it makes up for in the subtlety of its hermeneutical analysis and some big ideas. One such idea, or collection of interconnected ideas, is laid out in the opening lines of his arresting study:

> Western Christian reading of the Bible in the days before the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth century was usually strongly realistic, i.e., at once literal and historical, and not only doctrinal and edifying. The words and sentences meant what they said, and because they did so they accurately described real events and real truths that were rightly only put in those terms and no others… Christian preachers and theological commentators, Augustine the most notable among them, had envisaged the real world as formed by the sequence told by the biblical stories. That temporal world covered the span of ages from creation to the final consummation to come, and included the governance both of man's natural environment and of that secondary environment which we often think of as provided for man by himself and call "history" or "culture."[44]

shocked by LeClerc's hermeneutical stance ("Reimarus, Travel Diary Fragment, 1720/21," in *Between Philology and Radical Enlightenment: Herman Samuel Reimarus, 1694–1768*, ed. Martin Mulsow (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 22–38).

[42] See Klaus Scholder, *Ursprünge und probleme der Bibelkritik im 17. Jahrhundert: ein Beitrag zur Entstehung der historisch-kritische Theologie* (Munich: Kaiser, 1966) and Reventlow, *Bibelautorität und Geist der Moderne*.

[43] Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*.

[44] Frei, *Eclipse*, 1.

For Frei, then, modern biblical criticism is primarily historical criticism (of one kind or another), and has much more profound implications for liturgical and devotional uses of the Bible than Barton suggests, at least for those with feet in the Church and the academy. On this view of the history of biblical hermeneutics—which is also a sweepingly generalised theory about the worldview of the literate minority of Western Christendom[45]—pre-eighteenth-century readers of the Bible were typically immersed in a biblical narrative, from creation to apocalypse, which defined their reality: their understanding of the past, their sense of the present, and their anticipation of the future. What happened in the Enlightenment amounted to what Frei calls "the great reversal."[46] This refers to a radical reorientation whereby because of a host of intellectual and social transformations, the Bible was no longer judged to be capable of providing the overarching narrative framework into which all known reality could fit. Rather, that biblical story of humanity and the cosmos had to be incorporated into a much wider body of knowledge, where its authority could no longer be taken for granted, and which had to compete with other grand narratives: theological and philosophical, religious and secular.

Frei does not detail the reasons for this shift, but they must include the legacies of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Scientific Revolution explored at length by Scholder, Reventlow, and their more economical successors.[47] In Frei's history of biblical hermeneutics, the Christian inheritors of the now unsustainable historical-literal approach to biblical narrative gravitated towards either historical reconstruction or some form of biblical theology.[48] The former sought to identify the real meaning and theological value of biblical narratives with the historically defensible (that which lies "behind" the

[45] For all his talk of "Western Christian reading," Frei's focus is overwhelmingly on the leading lights of the Protestant Reformation: Martin Luther and John Calvin (18–37), when "literal and historical reading… received new impetus… when it became the regnant mode of biblical reading" (1). Frei acknowledges that spiritual and allegorical senses were "permissible" when used in the pre-modern Western Church, "but they must not offend against a literal reading of those parts which most obviously seem to demand it" (1). What is missing is any demonstration that it was ever so obvious which parts demanded it.

[46] Frei, *Eclipse*, 130.

[47] Gregory Dawes has a concise distillation in *The Historical Jesus Question: The Challenge of History to Religious Authority* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 1–23.

[48] Those who gravitated towards the historical-apologetic approach included "theologically conservative" biblical commentators who "had to meet rationalistic and historical-critical interpreters of the Bible on the latter's home ground" (Frei, *Eclipse*, 86–7).

text); the latter sought to render narratives theologically meaningful through thematic analysis: retaining a unity of religious ideas across the canon, if not a unity of history underpinning it. What both interpretive options shared is a tendency to locate the meaning and value of biblical narratives in something other than the narratives themselves—either because only parts of those narratives can be vindicated by historical enquiry, or because certain narratives give sensuous expression to compelling ideas in the history of Christian dogma, in natural theology, or some other extra biblical source of religious truth.[49]

Frei focussed particular attention on how critics, such as the self-styled "freethinker" Anthony Collins (1676–1729), sought to discredit the notion that authors of Old Testament prophecies, quoted in the Gospels, ever had Jesus as their intended reference, or that the details of Jesus's life consisted in literal fulfilments of those prophecies.[50] The supposed success of this project helped to drive a historical and narrative gap between the stories of Jesus in the Gospels and the texts of the Old Testament, thereby undermining the apologetic value of prophecy for Christian theologians. With the assault on prophecy under way in the eighteenth century, some apologists turned (not for the first time) to Jesus's miracles and other supernatural occurrences in his life as evidence of his Messiahship.[51] This occasioned a fierce pamphlet war in England, with theological combatants pitted against each other regarding the historical veracity of miracles, and the separate but related question of whether they constituted a viable way of vindicating Christianity against sceptical detractors. As the centre of gravity in biblical criticism shifted from Anglophone to German traditions of scholarship, the question of miracles was also taken up in earnest by the latter.

[49] "One had to draw the lessons from it [the Bible] by applying it to those general religious and moral ideas that were not the privileged product of a single mysteriously infused or revealed religious truth" (Frei, *Eclipse*, 106).

[50] See ibid., chap. 4.

[51] John Locke appealed to the evidential value of miracles in *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures* (London, 1695), the earlier *A Third Letter for Toleration* (London, 1692), and in the posthumously published *Discourse on Miracles* (London, 1706). Relevant sections of these works have been brought together in *The Reasonableness of Christianity with a Discourse of Miracles and Part of A Third Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. I. T. Ramsey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 25–77, 79–87, 90–97.

The Eclipse of the Supernatural

For a rejection of historical-literalism and biblical supernaturalism, and a remorseless application of rival hermeneutics, two writers stand out from the periods in focus: Thomas Woolston (1668–1733) and David Strauss (1808–74). Strauss is a canonical figure in biblical studies, most famous (or infamous) for his *mythische Auslegung* (mythical interpretation) of miracles in the first edition of his *Das Leben Jesu*.[52] Woolston has his place in intellectual history, too: as one of a coterie of Anglophone writers involved in a publishing sensation often referred to as the "Deist Controversy,"[53] where cheap print books, written in the vernacular, served as the vehicle for religious polemic, scepticism and apologetics among an increasingly literate public. Woolston features in histories of biblical studies, usually as a rhetorically abrasive character who challenged the default piety of scholars towards the biblical text, and thus helping to clear the way for the development of more sophisticated historical-critical analyses.[54] Some of the more generous estimations have seen in Woolston's comprehensive figurative method of interpretation an anticipation of Strauss's comprehensive mythical stance.[55] The two writers are comparable not only for their anti-literalism and anti-supernaturalism (though there are important qualifications to the latter on Woolston's side), but for the extent to which they scandalised their contemporaries: Strauss forfeited his academic career when his professorship at Zurich was aborted before it could officially start, due to the hostile reaction to *Das Leben Jesu*;[56] Woolston sacrificed his liberty at His Majesty's pleasure, convicted of blasphemy after his six notorious *Discourses on the Miracles of Our Saviour* (1727 and 1729).[57] Before proceeding with an analysis of the working methods of these provocative writers, it is worth commenting on the different intellectual contexts for both men's entrance into the debate over miracles.

[52] David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, 1835–1836).

[53] The classic eighteenth-century study, and still the most exhaustive, is John Leyland's *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers that have Appeared in England in the Last and Present Century*, 2 vols. (London, 1754–1755) The "Deist Controversy" takes its name from the supposed religious position of some of the chief antagonists, but see below.

[54] Baird, *Deism to Tübingen*, 39–55, where Woolston is one of seven "deists" discussed.

[55] See Herrick, *Radical Rhetoric*, 100. Strauss himself acknowledges the work of Woolston in his history of precursors to his own position (see *Life of Jesus*, 45–46).

[56] Horton Harries, *David Friedrich Strauss and His Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), chap. 15.

[57] For all six works (with replies to critics), see Woolston, *Discourses*.

Woolston was an Anglican priest, and a fellow of Sidney College, Cambridge, during the aforementioned "Deist Controversy." This episode was occasioned by the work of writers influenced by, among other things, the empiricism and religious evidentialism of John Locke (1632–1704).[58] Locke thought that the Gospels were credible sources of evidence for the truth of Christianity, relaying matters of fact about Jesus which the authors or their sources had witnessed, and he saw no philosophical difficulty in affirming the Messiahship of Jesus, placing particular emphasis on miracles in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*.[59] Once this evidentialist epistemology was unleashed among writers with a more jaundiced view of the guardians of Christian history and dogma than Locke, however, and with a greater interest in comparative religious history, the evidential demand was not so easily met.[60] Woolston was one such writer:

> History affords us Instances of Men, such as of *Apollonius Tyanæus*, *Vespasian*, and of the *Irish Stroaker*, *Greatrex*, who have miraculously cured Diseases to the Admiration of Mankind, as well as our *Jesus*: But if any of them, or any other greater Worker of Miracles than they were, should withall assume to himself the Title of a Prophet, and Author of a new Religion, I humbly conceive, we ought not to give heed to him.[61]

Woolston rather wandered into the debate on miracles while engaged in a discussion of other proofs of Jesus's Messiahship.[62] Already we see the effects of modern historical-critical assumptions in (self-professed) Christian writers: the focus is on Jesus's messianic status. In previous centuries when Christians wrote about Jesus as manifest in the Gospels, philosopher-theologians like St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–

[58] See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1690), bk. 4, chap. 19, sect. 11.

[59] Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*, 25–77.

[60] This was the conclusion of, among others, Peter Annet in works such as *Deism Fairly Stated, and Fully Vindicated from the Gross Imputations and Groundless Calumnies of Modern Believers* (London, 1746). Woolston showed at least a passing interest in ancient religious movements, charismatic leaders, and miracle workers (see *Discourse*, 12, 51; and *Fourth Discourse*, 27).

[61] Woolston, *Discourses*, 11.

[62] His primary focus at the time was the question of prophecy, occasioned by the writings of Collins. See Woolston, *The Moderator Between an Infidel and an Apostate: Or the Controversy Between the Author of the Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (London, 1725).

1274), were squarely focussed on the Incarnation: why it happened,[63] and whether or not it manifested itself in history in a theologically appropriate and edifying manner.[64] This is not to say that pre-modern Christian writers discounted Jesus's Messiahship (this was the historical vehicle of the Incarnation), nor that Christian apologists in the eighteenth century ceased believing in the Incarnation. But in some major theological publications the emphasis shifted from cosmic and transcendent categories of analysis to historical and immanent categories.[65] "Messiah" was a well attested and religiously edifying title in the Judaism from which Christianity emerged, and there were hopes and expectations among at least some first century Jews that God would send his anointed one. The intellectual case therefore centred on arguments to show that Jesus was this expected Messiah.[66]

In the case of Strauss, Jesus's Messiahship and the proofs which might be offered in its favour were not the issue. The context for his involvement was a debate over how to *interpret* miracles in the Gospels. Strauss famously took

[63] Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo, or, Why God was Made Man*, trans. Edward S. Prout (London: Religious Tract Society, 1886).

[64] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 4, pt. 3, qs. 1–59.

[65] This focus on the category of the Messiah as an identity capable of historical demonstration can be detected in the seventeenth century, in an emerging tradition of historical apologetic exemplified by recognised pioneers of the historical-critical study of the Bible: for example the Dutch scholar and legal theorist Hugo Grotius, *Sensus librorum sex, quos pro veritate religionis Christianae* (Marie, 1627), esp. bk. v. This preoccupation with Jesus's messianic identity and the need for historical authentication developed in different national contexts, and is clearly present in the work of the English clergymen Daniel Whitby in *Logos tēs pisteōs, or, An Endeavour to Evince the Certainty of Christian Faith, and of the Resurrection of Christ in Particular* (Oxford: 1671). In the eighteenth century, the concern with Jesus's messianic status and historical evidence bears the more sceptical fruit of Anthony Collins (see below). More subtle historiographical (and apologetic) interests can be detected in the work of the English polymath William Whiston in his *Six Dissertations* (London, 1743); the title of the first of these dissertations is indicative of his historical-apologetic interests: "The Testimonies of Josephus, Concerning Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, and James the Just, vindicated."

[66] This was a preoccupation of Locke in *Reasonableness of Christianity*—so much so that he had to defend himself against claims that he had reduced Christianity to this singular claim: see John *Edwards, Some Thoughts concerning the Several Causes and Occasions of Atheisme* (London: 1695), 105. Locke responded to the charge in the first three sections of *A Second Vindication of The Reasonableness of Christianity* (London, 1697). Ironically, by the time we get to Strauss's theological reflections on the Christian inheritance, the medieval focus on the category of Incarnation over Messiahship is revived, albeit with a radical deflationary twist with respect to Christian particularism: the myth of Jesus's Messiahship becomes the accidental historical vessel of the idea of God's Incarnation with the whole world (see *Life of Jesus*, 777–81). This is where Strauss's pantheist (or panentheist) tendencies come into view, although see also below.

aim at two approaches to miracles that were current in the literature: the so-called "supernaturalists," who argued for the reality of the miracles of Jesus as part of the supernatural dimension of history;[67] and the so-called "rationalists," who naturalized the miracles, grounding them in the most plausible mundane explanation available, thereby preserving as much history from the Gospels as possible.[68] Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* scarcely amounts to a *life* of Jesus.[69] It is not even a study of the Gospels as related *sources* for the life of Jesus. It is an exhaustive and exhausting analysis of the supernatural dimension of the Gospels, although the theory used to explain the origin of this dimension threatens to become a hermeneutical acid,[70] dissolving the historical fabric of the story of Jesus as it seeps through the Gospels and annihilates the natural and supernatural alike.[71] Woolston's *Discourses* do not constitute a life of Jesus either, but they make no pretence of doing so. What they share with *Das Leben Jesu* is that while the *Discourses* are ostensibly trained on the supernatural, the method they employ (teasing out the spiritual senses) has the capacity to dissolve mundane features in the life of Jesus (this time into allegory), even ones that some influential modern scholars have judged pivotal to the trajectory of his life and religious mission.[72]

The precise modus operandi of both writers also bears comparison: they discuss the plausibility of a story conceived as historical reportage of supernatural events, and having invariably found it wanting, they proceed to explain it based on a judgement about the kind of literary material they are dealing with. But there is usually an important and prolonged intermediate step in

[67] They included the theologians Christoph Pfaff and Sigmund Bumgarten, discussed in Frei, *Eclipse*, chap. 5.

[68] The most famous figure in this tradition was Heinrich Paulus; see Schweitzer on the latter's "fully developed rationalism" (*Quest*, chap. 5).

[69] Although there is a discussion of chronology of his public mission (*Life of Jesus*, pt. 2, chap. 3).

[70] "Universal Acid" is the title of chap. 3 of Daniel C. Dennett's study of another controversial nineteenth-century theory, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (London: Penguin, 1995). The kind of "acid" I am thinking of is purely a historical and literary one.

[71] Strauss seems ambivalent about the historicity of Jesus's baptism by John, although he acknowledges that it "furnishes the most natural explanation for the messianic project in Jesus," whereas other users of the same method, such as Karl Fritzche, were prepared to let this whole scene be consigned to "mythos" (*Life of Jesus*, 246). Compare this to one of the major figures of twentieth-century New Testament scholarship, who has argued that the baptism of Jesus by John is "beyond dispute" (E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 10).

[72] They include the cleansing of the temple. See E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), chap. 1; for Woolston's evisceration of the scene see *Discourses*, 22–31.

Strauss, where he considers episodes in the life of Jesus as mundane history:[73] in other words, he considers the "rationalist" position on miracles. In the case of Woolston, the possible historical background to the stories is given minimal consideration, and rationalism is not even treated as a viable option *except* when he is entertaining the sceptic's point of view in considering the merit of different apologetic strategies.[74] For Woolston, the Gospels' depictions of Jesus's miracles are, and always were, supposed to prefigure spiritual and moral realities in the lives of those who encounter them (the Church): the texts are historically forward looking and figurative, and the warrant for reading them this way is said to lay in the Church fathers and ancient Jewish exegetes, who were more familiar than modern readers with the proper way of interpreting and decoding sacred writings.[75] In the case of Strauss, these narrative depictions are the literary product of a mythologizing impulse in Jesus's early followers who, without malicious intent, conceived the story of his life in terms dictated by the Hebrew Bible (or the Christian Old Testament) which furnished their view of how a Messiah should be represented. So the Gospels, on Strauss's view, are mythical and historically backward looking, and the warrant for reading them this way resides in lessons drawn from the Hebrew Bible,[76] and parallels between the New Testament with other religious writings of antiquity.[77] Let us now take the two writers in turn; in each case, I will say more about the author and their working methods, before taking the transfiguration scene and its immediate aftermath (Matt 17:1–13, Mark 9:2–13, Luke 9:28–36) as a case study in how the two critics analyse supernatural scenes in the Gospels.[78]

Woolston was first charged with blasphemy following the publication of *The Moderator between an Infidel and an Apostate* (1725). In this work, Woolston argued that Christians should hold their nerve when defending their faith on prophetic grounds, because the historical-literal interpretation of prophecy, dismantled by Collins, was so far from the original manner of interpreting these prophecies (figuratively) that little was lost by this sceptical

[73] Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 88–89.

[74] See Woolston, *Discourse*, 40–45; *Second Discourse*, 7–18; *Third Discourse*, 5–15; *Fourth Discourse*, 4–18; *Fifth Discourse*, 8–42.

[75] See Woolston, *Discourse*, 5–6.

[76] Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 52–59.

[77] Ibid., 69–86, 89–91.

[78] The transfiguration is a theologically potent narrative staging post in the Synoptic accounts, and one of the first scenes that Woolston considered in his *Discourse*, 40–50; Strauss later examined the same scene in his *Life of Jesus*, 535–46.

project.[79] Woolston even speculates that, in time, prophecy, properly understood, could be key to the conversion of other religions, not least Judaism.[80] But it was another strand in Woolston's argument that caught the attention of ecclesiastical authorities, when he mused that an alternative apologetic strategy, the appeal to miracles, was destined to crushing failure. For when taken literally, Jesus's miracles were festooned with absurdities and moral outrages that could not, and should not, be taken to have any ground in history let alone count as evidence for his Messiahship:[81] even the "Resurrection of Christ then, which wants a good Proof of itself, proves nothing". Initially convicted of blasphemy for such cursory and dismissive treatments of the evidential value of the Resurrection, the charge was later quashed when the well-connected William Whiston (1667–1752), a natural philosopher and famed translator of Josephus, appealed to the attorney general on the grounds of insufficient theological expertise in court proceedings.[82] The irony in this intervention is that over ten years earlier, Whiston—who succeeded Isaac Newton as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics—had been forced out of Cambridge University for his increasingly indiscreet Arianism.[83] Nonetheless, the famous heretic was taken to have cast sufficient doubt on the question of whether Woolston's irreverent comments were sufficient to place him outside the margins of Christian orthodoxy.[84]

Having enjoyed this judicial reprieve, Woolston penned a response to his critics wholly lacking in contrition but brimming with sarcasm and de-

[79] See Thomas Woolston, *The Moderator between an Infidel and an Apostate*, 3rd ed. (London, 1729), 49.

[80] See ibid., 84–87; and his first *Discourse*, 3. Woolston was of course wrong about global Jewry, although perhaps he was too quick to dismiss the power of the literal sense in popular religion: in addition to the many Christians who still make use of this strategy, the controversial Jews for Jesus, officially founded in 1973, consistently cite the literal fulfilment of prophecy as evidence for Jesus's Messiahship: "What Proof Do you Have that Jesus was the Messiah?" March 27, 2015, http://www.jewsforjesus.org/answers/jesus/proofessay.

[81] Woolston, *Moderator*, 53.

[82] William H. Trapnell, "Woolston, Thomas, bap. 1668, d. 1733." In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004–) http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29963.

[83] On Whiston's career, see James Force, *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); for Whiston's own account of his turbulent life in letters, see *An Historical Preface to Primitive Christianity Reviv'd. With an Appendix Containing an Account of the Author's Prosecution at, and Banishment from the University of Cambridge* (London, 1711).

[84] See Trapnell, "Woolston."

fiance.[85] In a rhetorical move that would become a signature, he dedicated each of his six *Discourses* to one of his ecclesiastical accusers. On the title page of his first *Discourse*, he addresses "the right reverend father in God, Edmund Lord Bishop of London"—the very same Bishop who had referred him to the judiciary for his remarks in the *Moderator*. He concedes that in a previous publication,

> some expressions dropped from my pen… which for want for illustration gave my Lordship some offence… But having now fully explained myself… I hope you'll be reconciled to me; and as you are a lover of truth, will, against interest and prejudice, yield to the force of it.[86]

It seems unlikely that Woolston seriously expected his critics to "yield to the force" of the truth (as he understood it), when the theses he intended to defend included:

> That the literal history of many of the miracles of Jesus, does imply absurdities, improbabilities and incredibilitys recorded by the Evangelists; consequently, they, either in whole or in part, were never wrought… but are only related as prophetical and parabolic narratives of what would be mysteriously and more wonderfully done by him.[87]

How does he defend this positon in his analysis of specific Gospel stories? When he turns to the transfiguration scene, with the focus on Matthew's account, he is characteristically scathing about the literal sense:

> The Word in the Original for transfigured, is μεταμορφωθη, that is, he was metamorphosed, transform'd… And what is to be understood by a *Metamorphosis*, we are to learn not only from the natural Import of the Word, but from the ancient Use of it.

[85] This scornful tone characterises all his *Discourses*, and when it furnished his discussion of the Gospels as well as his ripostes to ecclesiastical opponents, Woolston found himself in a second blasphemy trial. For his own version of the ordeal, see *An Account of the Trial of Thomas Woolston, B.D. Sometime Fellow of Sidney College, in Cambridge, on Tuesday the Fourth of March, 1729, at the Court of King's-Bench, in Guildhall* (London, 1729). Woolston was convicted, sentenced to one year in prison, and fined £100.

[86] Woolston, *Discourse*, 4.

[87] Ibid., 3.

> Accordingly, it signifies nothing less than the Change or Transformation of a Person into the Forms, Shapes, and Essences of Creatures and Things of a quite different Species, Size, and Figure: But *Jesus*, it is conceived, was not so *transfigured*. Our *Divines*, I suppose, would not have him thought such a *Posture-Master* for the whole World. If I, or anyone else, should assert, that *Jesus* upon the Mount transform'd himself into a Calf, a Lyon, a Bear, a Ram, a Goat, an Hydra, a Stone, a Tree… I dare say there would, among our orthodox *Divines*, be such Exclamations against me for Blasphemy.[88]

Having highlighted what he takes to be the absurdity of the literal sense—the historical-semantic sense, as he understands it—Woolston then wonders what the meaning and purpose of this whole episode is conceived as supernatural history: from the transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah (Matt 17:3–5), to the dissent from the mountain and Jesus's insistence that his disciples should not tell anyone of their experience (17:9). Considering the incident quite apart from the narrative unfolding of Jesus's messianic identity and ultimate fate in the Gospels, he can see none whatsoever. Even his hero Origen, supreme allegorist of antiquity, treats the motivation behind Jesus's demand for secrecy to be grounded in the desire not to further trouble the souls of those who would later have to see him crucified.[89] Whatever the plausibility of that explanation, it is an explanation rooted in the internal logic of the narrative. For Woolston, however, the scene speaks of a mysterious and more distant future than the death of Jesus. Indeed, in a remarkably self-referential hermeneutical move, Woolston finds in this story an attack on the very same literal sense of scripture that modern interpreters tend to give it, and which he is resisting: for the "Way to attain to the Sight of this glorious Vision, is by ascending (not by local Motion, but by Reason) to the Tops of the Mountain of the mysterious and sublime sense of the Law and the Prophets"—the law represented by the appearance of Moses; the prophets represented by the appearance of Elijah. Whereas "if we continue in the plains and valleys of the letter [of scripture], like the Multitude under

[88] Woolston, *Discourse*, 42.

[89] See Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, bk. 12, chap. 48, in Alexander Roberts and Arthur Cleveland Coxe, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to* AD *325*, trans. John Patrick, vol. 9 (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896–97).

the Mountain [Jesus's unenlightened followers] we shall never see Jesus in his shining Vestments." The voice which speaks from the cloud during this scene, confirming Jesus as the beloved Son is said to represent, "The voice of prophecy which will sound in the Ears of our Apprehensions."[90] In other words, the story is about something which happens to those who believe in Jesus, not something which happened to the historical Jesus himself. Woolston concludes his first *Discourse* with a direct address to his readers:

> Be no longer mistaken good sirs—the history of Jesus' life, as recorded in the Evangelists, is an emblematic representation of his spiritual life in the soul of man; and his miracles are figures of his mysterious operations. The Gospels are in no part a literal story, but a System of Mystical philosophy or theology.[91]

This seems a good illustration of Frei's eclipse of biblical narrative, albeit one of a very different order to other eighteenth-century Anglophone writers who would attempt to save Christianity and its sacred text from the ravages of historical and philosophical scepticism. This is not a reworking of those popular currents of thought manifest in Toland's signature work of heterodoxy, *Christianity Not Mysterious*; on the contrary, mystery is embraced by Woolston as of the very essence of Scripture.[92] Woolston is not even concerned to strip Christianity of miracles as such (though he maintains they would never convince the sceptic of the truth of the religion).[93] It is the Gospel narratives themselves that are stripped of their supernaturalism in terms of their meaning, and recast as prefigurations of the spiritual transformation of those who encounter Christ in faith as the Incarnation of the law and the prophets. This encounter takes place when the Gospels are read in their "sublime and anagogical Sense," looking ahead to the promise of a "New Jerusalem."[94] The connection between realistic historical narrative and religious truth is severed. Rationalistic criticism of biblical narrative and a concern for historical plausibility is fused with salvific mysticism in a hybrid of reading strategies: a "non-critica" or "pre-critical" Christian hermeneutic, which sees the meaning of biblical texts as pointing to the future of the Church; and a "critical"

[90] Woolston, *Discourse*, 48.

[91] Ibid., 65.

[92] In a very different spirit to Toland, Woolston championed "Mystery, Allegory, and Cabalism" (*Second Discourse*, 66).

[93] See Woolston, *Discourse*, 42.

[94] Ibid., 47, 49.

hermeneutic, which asks the same searching questions about genre, semantics, narrative integrity, and historical plausibility of biblical texts as other stories found in ancient religious literature (combining elements of Barton and Frei's accounts of biblical criticism).[95] Against Barton, however, the truth and meaning of these texts are coextensive: to understand the Gospel as parabolic narrative is to see the truth that abides in them.

Strauss sought no future-orientated meaning in the Gospels. He was writing against the supernaturalist and rationalist tendencies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in a mythical tradition associated with Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826) and W. M. L. de Wette (1780–1849), which called into question the value of the Hebrew Bible as a historical source, but celebrated its poetic value, its theo-centric patriotism, and its spiritual qualities.[96] Strauss was not in the business of celebration, and his rhetorical approach to the Gospels is in marked contrast to Woolston's, whose "levity" does not go unnoticed in Strauss's substantial acknowledgement of those who blazed the trail for his own work,[97] which takes in writers from Philo and Origen to his modern German predecessors.[98] As an interpreter of the Gospels Strauss is detailed, clinical, humourless and pitiless.[99] And yet the picture he draws of an ancient collective consciousness spontaneously producing mythos fit for a Messiah in response to the impressions Jesus made on people is packed with religious and psychological intrigue. Strauss does little to encourage such enthusiasm, however, and the features of the historical person who caused this world transforming episode of unconscious mythical production, remains a mystery. In so far as Strauss thinks he is able to explain how the supernatural content of the Gospels took the shape it did, he has done his job as a critic, and what truth remains in the texts is a sepa-

[95] There has always been the question of how serious Woolston was about this return to allegory, and to what extent this was rhetorical subterfuge for his sceptical rationalism. Questions have also been repeatedly raised about Woolston's mental health. For a vindication of him on the first point, and a nuanced consideration of the latter, see William H. Trapnell, *Thomas Woolston: Madman and Deist?* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994).

[96] Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 54.

[97] Ibid., 46.

[98] Ibid., 41–65.

[99] In the "Concluding Dissertation," Strauss writes: "The results of the inquiry which we have now brought to a close, have apparently annihilated the greatest and the most valuable part of that which the Christian has been wont to believe concerning the Saviour Jesus, have uprooted all the animating motives which he has gathered from his faith, and withered all his consolations" (ibid., 757).

rate issue. In that sense, he appears very much in the mould of the critic as imagined by Barton.[100] Again, we take the transfiguration to illustrate.

Like Woolston the focus is on Matthew's account. Both men were writing before the widespread acceptance of Markan priority, although Strauss was working in the decade that the seminal studies in this area were carried out.[101] And reading his discussion post-William Wrede (1859–1906),[102] the absence of any obvious interest in the secrecy motif in Mark, which constitutes an interesting background for the transfiguration, may strike readers as a peculiar omission, but Strauss showed limited interest in the internal narrative dynamics of each Gospel. When it comes to an assessment of the transfiguration in its immediate narrative context, Strauss concurs with Woolston in the latter's inability to see the internal logic of this miracle conceived as supernatural history. One of the more obvious interpretations of the rationale for the transfiguration so conceived would be that it glorifies Jesus in the eyes of his disciples. But Strauss deems this unnecessary, because Jesus's words and deeds should have been sufficient to have secured this status already, at least within the context of the narrative;[103] as such, the ambiguity in the disciples' response to Jesus, especially in Mark's account, is overlooked. The appearance of Elijah is credited with marginally more internal narrative probability than Moses, in so far as Elijah was said to have ascended to heaven, whereas Moses died and was buried. For the supernaturalists Strauss is writing against, however, it seems unlikely that such observations would make much of an impression: the idea that an omnipotent God could resurrect and reconfigure Moses is scarcely less plausible than the idea that God could freeze the ageing process in Elijah before taking him to heaven for a centuries-long stay prior to his mountaintop meeting with Jesus.

Natural interpretations of the story are considered and rejected: that the three disciples (Peter, James and John) could have found beams of light on Jesus's garments to be theologically revelatory is judged prima facie implau-

[100] "Biblical criticism requires the reader not to foreclose the question of the truth of a text before reading it, but to attend to its semantic possibilities before (logically before, not necessarily temporally before) asking whether what it asserts is true or not" (Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 6).

[101] In the same year that *Das Leben Jesu* appeared, Karl Lachmann published an essay which helped lay the groundwork for Markan priority: "De Ordine narrationum in evangeliis synopticis," *Theologische Studien and Kritiken* 8 (1835): 570–90.

[102] William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901).

[103] Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 536–37.

sible; nothing about this scene, considered naturalistically, suggests a revelation of "heavenly glory."[104] When considering the appearance of Moses and Elijah, Strauss evaluates a number of interpretations. Dreams are rejected, on account of the fact that the content seems to be shared among the disciples.[105] The eccentric but entertaining theories of the German historian K. H. G. Venturini (1768–1849) are also considered. Venturini held that Jesus was secretly aligned with the Essenes, and so it was consistent with that thesis to suggest that Jesus went to the mountain for a meeting with his allies. Matthew informs us that the three disciples had been sleeping, and, according to Venturini, waking in a daze they mistook the two mysterious figures (Essenes) for prophets.[106] Strauss is unpersuaded: Why would the disciples make such an extraordinary error in perception, and, moreover, why would Jesus not correct them on the matter once their illusion became apparent? Strauss sees no obvious answer, and so he proceeds, as usual, to the mythical viewpoint.

The starting point for his *mythischen Auslegung* is the illumination of Jesus: "To the oriental, and more particularly to the Hebrew imagination, the beautiful, the majestic, is the luminous… [and] the most celebrated example of this kind is the luminous countenance of Moses mentioned in Exodus."[107] Strauss sees the assent of the mountain by Jesus with his three followers as a direct parallel to Moses's second assent of the mountain with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu.[108] With respect to the appearances of Moses and Elijah, Strauss joins Woolston in emphasising the symbolism of those men who are emblematic of the law and the prophets, although the point of Strauss's analysis is to show how the evangelists contrived a representation of Jesus that was appropriate to their religious worldview: "we have here a mythus… the tendency of which is twofold: first, to exhibit in the life of Jesus an enhanced reputation as the glorification of Moses; and secondly, to bring Jesus as the Messiah into contact with his forerunners."[109].

In terms of the internal *narrative* coherence of the scene, Strauss judges supernatural history to be no less problematic than a natural one later rendered into fabulous terms. But supernaturalism is always unacceptable, and

[104] Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 540.
[105] Ibid., 539.
[106] Ibid., 539–40.
[107] Ibid., 543–44.
[108] Ibid., 544, referring to Exod 34:29.
[109] Ibid., 545.

primarily because of a candid commitment to a form of theological naturalism whereby "the absolute cause never disturbs the change of secondary causes by single, arbitrary acts of interposition."[110]

If the "absolute cause" is supposed to be God, then at this point in his intellectual development Strauss sounds more like a textbook deist than one of the most famous so-called deists (Woolston) ever did. In this, Strauss can be compared with one of the other great provocateurs of early modern historical Jesus research, Reimarus, who was more paradigmatically deistic in his outlook than the so-called "English deists" who helped to fire his critical imagination.[111] Those textbook definitions of "deism" which emphasise a belief in God but a repudiation of all revealed religion are of limited use when trying to understand the public phenomenon of "deism" during the English Enlightenment discussed in standard histories of biblical studies.[112] Some accounts acknowledge their debt to Samuel Johnson's (1709–84) concise definition,[113] but it would be surprising if Dr. Johnson's influence was restricted to those cases. More recent dictionaries which follow the thrust of Johnson's pithy account certainly manage to identify some of the discernible theological preferences which existed among those associated with eighteenth-century deism in various national contexts: the affirmation of "natural religion," for example, is unmistakable.[114] But the scarcity of Anglophone writers labelled "deists" who took a *consistently* negative position on revelation (Woolston certainly did not), combined with the fact that such labels were often attributed to writers during polemical exchanges and de-

[110] Ibid., 88.

[111] I discuss the connection between Reimarus and English language scholarship in Birch, "Road to Reimarus," especially 29–47. The work Reimarus left unpublished at his death was called *An Apology for the Rational Worshippers of God*, only published in full in the late twentieth-century (*Apologie; oder, Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, ed. Gerhard Alexander (Frankfurt: Insel, 1972)). The first fragment of this work, published by Lessing in 1774, was called *On the Toleration of Deists* (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "Von Duldung der Deisten," in *Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Arno Schilson, vol. 8. Werke 1774–1778 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 115–34).

[112] See Baird, *Deism to Tübingen*, where chap. 3 is titled "The Attack on Revealed Religion: The English Deists" (31–57).

[113] See Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 Vols. (London, 1755), *sv*; cf. Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought, 1778–1860* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1985), 36.

[114] See Simon Blackburn, "Deism," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 92.

nunciations,[115] makes the unqualified use of the term problematic. Strauss is more consistent in his denials of supernatural revelation. His idealist philosophical leanings, apparent in his "Concluding Dissertation,"[116] have been associated with pantheism rather than deism.[117] Theologically, deism and pantheism are sometimes presented as standing at "opposite end[s] of the spectrum."[118] But these theologies share much common ground, and defining writers as one rather than the other is sometimes a matter of honing in on a particular writer's emphasis at a given time, rather than a matter of major doctrinal disagreement. Toland, one of the most famous of the reputed "deists," is also credited with coining the term "pantheism" and indicating a strong affinity with that stance in certain works.[119] What those with (professed or attributed) deist and pantheist leanings shared is a commitment to the integrity of the created natural order and a suspicion (or outright rejection) of any interventions by the author (or "absolute cause") of nature. A reputed deist need not reject the divine immanence which is thought to be the calling card of the pantheist: for the deist, God is present in the stable order of nature from the moment of creation.[120] Likewise, a thinker associated with pantheism need not be committed to the view that God is synonymous with the material world without transcendent remainder.[121]

Appeals to the "laws of nature" or "universal laws," of the kind made by Strauss,[122] were very common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biblical scholarship, among reputed deists and pantheists alike.[123] This refrain was part of that attraction towards extra-biblical authorities in which edu-

[115] The point is made in Simon Schaffer's review of Robert E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy: A Study in Adaptions* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), *The British Journal for the History of Science* 17, no. 1 (1984), 117–18.

[116] Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, especially 777–84.

[117] He was "vaguely pantheistic" at this juncture, according to Frei (*Eclipse*, 234).

[118] Anthony C. Thisleton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

[119] See John Toland, *Socinianism Truly Stated: Recommended by a Pantheist to an Orthodox Friend* (London, 1705); and idem., *Panthesticon* (London, 1751).

[120] See Thomas Chubb, *The True Gospel of Jesus Christ Asserted Wherein is Shown What Is and What is Not that Gospel* (London, 1738), 197–205.

[121] See Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise [Tractatus Theologico-Politicus]*, trans. Samuel Shirley, with annots. by Seymour Feldman (1670; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 74, where Spinoza's concept of God is said to allude to "infinite other things besides matter."

[122] Violation of these laws is the "First" of Strauss's "Negative" criteria to identify the unhistorical in the Gospels (Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 87–88).

[123] Peter Addinall, *Philosophy and Biblical Interpretation: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), especially chap. 1.

cated commentators on the Bible sought to embed their interpretations. One of the principal modern sources of this concept was the theological voluntarism characteristic of the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution, when the laws invoked were, first and foremost, those of God himself, which could be repealed as quickly as they were made.[124] This was quickly forgotten by some writers in the eighteenth century, when this legalistic and monarchical conceptualisation of the relationship between God and nature was increasingly invoked to *preclude* (or render superfluous) the idea of the sovereign will of God ever acting in the world he created.[125] The intrusion of this kind of theological-metaphysics, subject to changing philosophical fashion, does not sit easily with the disciplinary aspirations for *Geschichtswissenschaft* imagined by the great classical historians of the nineteenth century, such as Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831) and Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), which was to "free history from any kind of philosophy."[126] Woolston was better able than Strauss to eschew definite metaphysical commitments in his biblical scholarship: at various points in his *Discourses* he actually concedes the possibility of Jesus performing miracles attributed to him, and confesses his personal belief in the Virgin Birth and Resurrection.[127] What he denies is that they were *adequate proofs* of Jesus's Messiahship. Woolston's objection to the use of miracles in apologetic discourse is theological, moral and epistemological. Strauss's objection to miracles conceived as historical events is theological and ontological. Where Strauss sees the literal narrative accounts of miracles as impressive (though fictitious) creations of the myth-making imagination (and impossible given his metaphysical commitments), Woolston acknowledges their metaphysical possibility but sees the potential for sceptical accusations of trickery, materialism and self-aggrandising

[124] See John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 26; Peter Harrison, "Voluntarism and Early Modern Science," *History of Science* 40, no. 1 (2002): 63–89; and John Henry, "Voluntarist Theology at the Origins of Modern Science: A Response to Peter Harrison," *History of Science* 47, no. 1 (2009): 79–113.

[125] The most famous statement of that kind is attributed to Pierre-Simon de Laplace (1749–1827) in a conversation with Napoleon about the absence of divine intervention in his scientific theorising: "Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là" ("I had no need of that hypothesis"), quoted in W. W. Rouse Ball, *A Short Account of the History of Mathematics* (New York: Dover Publications, 1908), 343. The authenticity of this quote is disputed, but it captures the spirit of this intellectual shift.

[126] Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 51.

[127] Woolston, *Discourse*, 37.

showmanship.[128] Despite these differences, however, both are committed to maintaining worldviews which transcend the empirical fruits of historical research, and, crucially, they allow their philosophical worldviews to condition their judgements as readers of the Bible. The same claim has of course been made of the great demythologiser and anti-supernaturalist, Bultmann, whose intellectual descent from (or affinities with) Strauss has been tracked in many studies.[129]

Conclusion

In his analysis of the miracles, Strauss starts with the supernaturalism of the Gospels and reasons backwards, past the historical Jesus himself and into the Old Testament to unlock the meaning of stories which had grown around him: stories which have the *appearance* of having been prefigured *in* the Hebrew Scripture, because they were unconsciously constructed *from* the Hebrew Scriptures. Woolston starts with the supernaturalism of the Gospels and reasons forwards: beyond the historical Jesus, his disciples, the evangelists, and on to the Church Fathers who, according to Woolston, grasped the moral and spiritual rather than the historical and material orientation of these texts, and understood all too well how moral and spiritual readings of the Gospels would minister to the needs of those for whom they were written.

In agreement with an important aspect of Frei's analysis of modern biblical criticism, the Gospels are understood by both Woolston and Strauss in terms which lay outside a literal, realistic reading of them in all their narrative fullness. But in many respects their approaches went against the grain of modern scholarship on the Gospels, which have so often been concerned to find the charismatic individual behind or among the "supernatural nimbus" which surrounds him.[130] For historical and theological reasons, these writers were prepared to let this individual be subsumed into unconscious mythical production (Strauss) inspired by the Hebrew Bible, or figurative imagery concerning the moral and salvific future of the Church (Woolston). On the

[128] Woolston, *Discourse*, 45; *Fourth Discourse*, 14; *Fifth Discourse*, 53.

[129] See, for instance Gunther Backhaus, *Kerygma und Mythos bei David Friedrich Strauss und Rudolf Bultmann* (Hamburg-Bergstedt: Herbert Reich, 1956.); Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); and Nicholas Adams, "The Bible," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 584.

[130] The phrase is Schweitzer's (*Quest*, 4).

one hand they do nothing to indulge popular supernatural readings, but nor do they pass over the miracles as somehow beyond the historian's legitimate scope of enquiry.[131] They both subject such stories to intense and openly disbelieving scrutiny, but they do not go in search of "the facts" which underpin these stories. To go in search of such facts is to misunderstand the kind of writings the Gospels are, and, as we have seen, for some that is essential to biblical criticism.[132] But the uncompromising rejection of rational / mundane historical explanations for miracles by Strauss is rooted in a commitment to reading the New Testament in terms of the Old Testament (a reversal of the traditional Christian hermeneutic, but still rooted in the pre-critical intuition that the Bible is to be read more or less as one book with "Christ as the subject matter"); while his uncompromising rejection of supernaturalism is rooted in philosophical-theological commitments which many have sought to bracket from historical criticism as an empirical enterprise. Woolston's bracketing of the historical truth of some of the miracles (including those he claimed to believe in) is more in line with the methodological naturalism and ontological openness advocated by some contemporary historical Jesus scholars and some historians outside of biblical studies.[133] But his bracketing of these events is less a matter of acknowledging the limits of historical enquiry, and more a matter of a commitment to the pre-modern spiritual senses of scripture as the repository of profound truths about the condition and destiny of humankind.

In some respects, both Woolston and Strauss look ahead to the critical modernism of Rudolf Bultmann,[134] attempting to offer constructive theological stances amidst the supposed intellectual wreckage of the Gospels (once

[131] Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 48.

[132] Ibid., 5.

[133] Robert L. Webb, "The Rules of the Game: History and Historical Method in the Context of Faith: The Via Media of Methodological Naturalism," *The Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 59–84; and Brad S. Gregory, "No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion," *History and Theory* 47, no. 4 (2008): 495–519. There are of course strict (ontological) naturalists—who are therefore much closer to Strauss—within contemporary biblical scholarship: see, for example, Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2004), 114; and James D. Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 234. For a discussion of these and other approaches from an Evangelical perspective, see Michael R. Licona, "Historians and Miracle Claims," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 12, nos. 1–2 (2014): 106–29.

[134] For Bultmann, "miracles… in themselves have no religious character" (Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (London: Collins, 1958), 173).

their realistic historical quality has been dismantled by the forensic critic).[135] But they also look back to the allegorising of Origen and his repudiation of the literal-historical sense of much of the biblical narrative. Both Strauss and Woolston presented sceptical views about the historicity of the Gospels, but neither could be said to have engaged in historical reconstruction with respect to the life of Jesus, since they treated this history as largely irretrievable,[136] and, theologically, not really to the point. In so far as Strauss engaged with biblical theology, it was the descriptive and analytic form which sought to show how religious ideas in the Old Testament were reimagined in the New. The historical narrative link between the Old and New Testaments is maintained by the exotic imagination Strauss hypothesised as the true historical connection between the canons.

Though minimalist in his own view of the historical Jesus, Bultmann maintained that "the context of the message (*kerygma*) is… an event, a historical fact, the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth, his birth but at the same time his work, his death and his resurrection."[137] Woolston would have agreed with Bultmann on the original context, and, again with Bultmann, would have insisted that any truth in Christianity must reside in the spiritual experience of the present encounter with the Gospels. But the Gospels should not be demythologized (pace Bultmann) as a precursor to recognising their existential demand;[138] rather, they should be recognised for the spiritual texts they always were in the writing of the Church Fathers, who received these texts in the afterglow of the Apostolic Age, and recognised their allegorical, moral and anagogical purpose.

[135] Bultmann shared with Strauss the view that the Gospels are in large part myth. Bultmann shared with Woolston the view that a correct reading of the Gospels could extract, from the supernatural form, the spiritual meaning. There is greater particularism in Woolston and Bultmann's view of religious truth, rooted as it is in a faith response to the salvific proclamation of the Gospels as witness to the revelation of Christ; for Strauss, the truth in Christianity is measured by the extent to which it awakens in us the idea of the *universal* relationship between God and all humanity (*Life of Jesus*, 780–81): the truth of the idea is only contingently attached to the Gospels.

[136] I am referring here to Strauss's first and fourth *Das Leben Jesus*: other editions make concessions to critics and attempt to give readers something closer to the more traditional biographical study of Jesus that many desired, most famously *Das Leben Jesu: für das deutsche Volk bearbeitet* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1864).

[137] Rudolf Bultmann, "Preaching: Genuine and Secularised," in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich*, ed. Walter Leibrecht (New York: Harper, 1959), 240.

[138] See Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in Bartsch, *Kerygma and Myth*, 1–44.

Writing in the formative centuries of modern biblical scholarship, it is not surprising that Woolston and Strauss should fail to correspond to any rarefied twentieth or twenty-first century models of criticism: Woolston holds together the rational and the mystical, the sceptical and spiritual; Strauss holds together a priori theological commitments with empirical history, a mythological hermeneutic with canonical presuppositions. Whether the purely "critical reader" of the Bible, on whatever definition, is a chimera regardless of the period or individuals concerned, is beyond the scope of this article. My aim here has been to show how theological commitments (Christian and non-Christian), and pre-modern hermeneutical preferences (the spiritual senses of the Quadriga and canonical unity) were part of the working methods and assumptions of recognised pioneers of modern critical scholarship, both in its popular sense of sceptical and irreverent, and in its more technical sense of the deployment of linguistic, literary and historical practises and judgements. The co-existence of these features is, I suspect, quite typical of modern intellectual engagement with biblical texts. The acknowledgment of such co-existence should, if nothing else, feature in any prolegomena to enquiries into the hybrid creature that is the modern biblical critic.