

Finding the Traces of Jesus

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In a previous article (*The Fourth R* 33-1, Jan-Feb 2020) I argued that reading the Bible as theological fiction frees one from the necessity of clarifying whether or not biblical references are factual and invites one to enter into the diverse worlds of meaning disclosed in the Bible's figurative references. In the process the reader is in a position to recognize that the Bible's supernatural references are imaginative ones that articulate inexplicable phenomena through the culturally mediated interpretations, beliefs, rituals, symbols, and traditions underlying the Bible's origins. Indeed, once we have clarified that the supernatural references are imaginative and the narratives make figurative, not literal, sense the stories receive a new voice with which to speak. Readers are now in a position to let the texts confront them in ways they could not before. They are not distracted by arguments about what did and did not "really" happen. Instead, they can discern horizons of meaning in the stories that will help them make sense of life and the world around them.

Tell Me the Story of Jesus

When we focus on the gospels and other New Testament references to Jesus we face an identical set of issues. Approaching the gospels as theological fiction challenges a basic assumption of popular Christian spirituality: that the gospels tell a unified and accurate story of Jesus, disclosing the divine-human Savior of humankind. I begin this article by focusing on the verses to "Tell Me the Story of Jesus," a gospel song that was popular in the fundamentalist Christian community in which I was reared. Its message will likely be familiar to at least some, yet it exposes a dissonance between the current popular story of Jesus and the gospels' stories. Composed by Frances ("Fanny") Crosby, the song was one of my favorite gospel hymns as a child.

Tell me the story of Jesus,
Write on my heart every word.
Tell me the story most precious,
Sweetest that ever was heard.
Tell how the angels in chorus,
Sang as they welcomed His birth.
"Glory to God in the highest!
Peace and good tidings to earth."

This article is adapted from *If You Find Jesus Bury Him! Reforming Biblical Spirituality* by Douglas L. Griffin, 2015.

Refrain:

Tell me the story of Jesus,
Write on my heart every word.
Tell me the story most precious,
Sweetest that ever was heard.

Fasting alone in the desert,
Tell of the days that are past.
How for our sins He was tempted,
Yet was triumphant at last.
Tell of the years of His labor,
Tell of the sorrow He bore.
He was despised and afflicted,
Homeless, rejected and poor.

Refrain

Tell of the cross where they nailed Him,
Writhing in anguish and pain.
Tell of the grave where they laid Him,
Tell how He liveth again.
Love in that story so tender,
Clearer than ever I see.
Stay, let me weep while you whisper,
Love paid the ransom for me.

*Refrain*¹

Even today I cannot read the song without humming the tune and refeeling the emotions it evoked. The song did not draw me into Jesus' story so much as it drew Jesus' story into me. It was heart. It was personal. It was simple. It was convincing. The story of Jesus was about sinners and redemption. It was about me. I remember being taught the significance of the story underlying the song. If I had been the only sinner on earth the story of Jesus' dying on the cross to cover my sins would have played out just for me. Who could help but to be overwhelmed by the strains of this song? It was a lovely song evoking a lovely experience. But it was mistaken.

Let us for the moment not quibble with the literalist overtones and assume that the four gospels present complementary features of the only and historically accurate story of Jesus. How close is the poem to the gospels' story of Jesus? The first verse recalls the angels' announcement of Jesus' birth. Even though a chorus of angels doesn't show up in Matthew, they do in Luke's narrative. However, in the second verse, we encounter

a problem. It begins with Jesus' temptations in the desert. We can live with that, even though his baptism by John is ignored. Let us say that the desert experience is a metonym for the whole narrative commencing with Jesus' baptism by John, to the spirit's infilling, to the spirit's driving Jesus into the wilderness, to the commencement of Jesus' ministry. Even then, the line that says he was tempted "for our sins" is new. That insertion is not really part of any gospel story. Mark, followed by Matthew and Luke, couples two pieces of theological information: he was driven there by the Holy Spirit and he was tempted by Satan. John's gospel does have the Baptist proclaim, "Look, here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). However, in John there is no wilderness temptation, nor is Jesus baptized. Nevertheless, let us allow such a poetic stretch since we have already allowed for the wilderness to serve as a metonym for the whole series of events. But we must admit that it is a stretch.

The next line is as expected, "Tell of the years of His labor." We look next for an allusion to Jesus' preaching, teaching, healing, touching, eating with sinners, and living into the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. Yet, what follows? "Tell of the sorrow he bore. He was despised and afflicted, homeless, rejected and poor." With just a brief mention of being homeless and poor, we move immediately into Jesus' passion. Just one line of our poem summarizes twenty-two chapters of Matthew! The other gospels are similarly truncated. We hear nothing about how Jesus lived with other people, what he said, or what he considered to be important for living in heaven's kingdom. From Jesus' being alone and tempted in the wilderness, we are transported to his being alone and suffering in his betrayal and trials.

Then, in verse three, we are told of his "writhing in anguish and pain" on the cross. However, none of the gospels even intimate how Jesus responded to the physical tortures endured on the cross. There is absolutely no reference, or even allusion, to writhing in agony. The gospel stories differ a little bit from one another. On the one hand, Mark and Matthew record his crying out "Why have you forsaken me?" quoting Psalm 22:1. On the other hand, Luke and John present Jesus as in control of the situation, as if he were impervious to the pain of the cross. All four gospels agree in narrating Jesus' unflinching silence, innocence, and courage in facing the false charges, capital threats, and hysterical cries of his opponents. We recognize behind the gospel narratives the influence of Second Isaiah's "suffering servant" character: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth" (Isa 53:7). The gospels portray Jesus' unflinching strength, not writhing agony.

Finally, we hear of his being laid in a grave, yet he lived again. But, the next line is startling: "Love in that story so

tender, Clearer than ever I see." How can we see tender love between Jesus and others when we have sung only of Jesus' being alone in temptation and suffering? How can we see love if we fail to see how he lived with others? The answer is captured in the last line, "Love paid the ransom for me." It all boils down not to Jesus' life, but to his death. Where is the love? It is a love story played out in heaven with the middle person of the Godhead voluntarily taking on human form in order to die, since God's character demands blood for sin.

The song is a caricature of what I call "Old Story Christianity" conceived within the Salvation History paradigm. Briefly stated, the paradigm postulates that the Bible comprises one cumulative story revealing God's pre-ordained plan for the salvation of the world and humanity through His Son, Jesus Christ. We see its nascent form among New Testament authors, like Paul, who believed Jesus to have been prefigured in Old Testament characters, like David. They interpreted their experiences with Jesus and the Jesus movement to be the fulfillment of God's mysteries that were just partially disclosed throughout Old Testament times. In Jesus, the full mystery of God is revealed. Following the Protestant Reformation, Salvation History achieved paradigmatic status such that Old Testament stories carried both literal and figurative meanings simultaneously. The literal meaning revealed God's saving activity within the Old Testament narrative itself, while the figurative meaning pointed forward to its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. In this interpretation the whole Bible tells the Old Story of Jesus and his love. However, even though the song above presents a moving story, it is not the gospels' story, as we have seen.

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus

It would be a mistake to conclude from this brief comparison between Old Story Christianity's song and the gospels that we are confronted by a simple dichotomy between the gospels' narrative and Old Story Christianity. Instead, we encounter multiple stories of Jesus in the Bible and Christian tradition. For example, it is now common knowledge among critical scholars and most *Fourth R* readers that the synoptic gospels used the same traditions to tell different stories and emphasize different theological understandings of Jesus. The Gospel of John wove a story of Jesus dramatically different from the synoptic gospels. Consequently, we should listen for multiple stories of Jesus in the New Testament. Who Jesus actually was and exactly what he taught lie buried beneath the layers of tradition with their multiple and varying stories. Each story portrays a different face of Jesus. Some portraits are admittedly very similar, but others are remarkably distinct.

Squabbles about articulating the "true" story of Jesus or about locating the "real" historical Jesus actually end up

getting us nowhere. Instead, the stories about Jesus should be recognized for what they are: the data, if you will, from which we try to interpret the lingering spirit of Jesus. Let us look at just some of these differences in the New Testament. For the sake of this discussion, we will allow the Gospel of Thomas into the mix since it probably represents the viewpoint of a late first-century or early second-century Jesus community. In other words, its faithful disciples would have been contemporaries with at least some of the communities represented in the canonical gospels. If we compare the range of meanings within just three different narrative themes in the New Testament, we can locate where different New Testament texts fall within each theme. This exercise is illustrative and is not intended to be exhaustive.

First, consider the emphasis on Jesus' crucifixion/resurrection. The Q Gospel* apparently has no concern for the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, being concerned instead for what Jesus' teachings revealed about the coming kingdom of God. In contrast, Paul's undisputed letters† are heavily focused on the significance of the cross/resurrection of Jesus but with little to no concern for the actual teachings of Jesus.² Next, consider emphasis on the human versus divine nature of Jesus. The Gospel of John presents Jesus as the incarnation of the divine and eternally pre-existent Word (Logos) of God, so that Jesus and the Father are mystically one. The Epistle of James, on the other hand, portrays Jesus as an exemplary but human wisdom teacher.³ According to this letter, he is probably not considered divine. Third, we might highlight the difference between texts that articulate Jesus' significance in light of Jewish cultic practices (temple rituals) and those that do not. The most clearly articulated comparison of Jesus' passion and resurrection with the temple cult is the book of Hebrews. On the other end, in the Gospel of Thomas Jesus' saving significance is not his sacrificial death or his priestly administration of the sacrificial cult. It is squarely in the saving knowledge that his teachings evoke.

If we take this comparative exercise further, we could then place all the New Testament texts on a line somewhere between the ends of each theme that we identified. For example, on the cross-resurrection theme represented by Paul on one end and Q on the other, one would readily

* The Q Gospel is a scholarly reconstruction of the written source that Matthew and Luke used in addition to the Gospel of Mark in writing their gospels. A reconstruction of the text of Q, with introduction and notes, is available in *The Complete Gospels*, ed. Robert J. Miller (Polebridge, 4th edition, 2010), 257–77.

† The undisputed letters of Paul comprise the earliest compositions of the New Testament, being composed about two decades before the Gospel of Mark. The undisputed letters are Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Many good study Bibles of the NRSV give an explanation for why each disputed letter might not be from Paul himself. Conversely, the book of Hebrews is undisputedly not one of Paul's letters.

see that Thomas lines up with Q while the canonical gospels would be arrayed between Q and Paul. Similarly, on the human-divine theme, Paul might consider Jesus divine, but not equal with God. So, Paul would be closer to James on that score. But, the Epistle to the Colossians, authored not by Paul but possibly by one of his disciples, seems to be closer to John.

Next, we might combine all three themes into a three-dimensional construct. Imagine a box in which the height (with ends at the top and bottom) represents the person of Jesus, the depth (with ends at the front and back) represents the centrality of the cross/resurrection, and the width (with ends at either side) represents how central temple references are for understanding Jesus. When we put all three dimensions together, we would end up with a three-dimensional scatter plot inside the box. Each of the points on the plot represents a New Testament text. Distances between points on the plot would represent relatively distinct stories of Jesus projecting his different faces. The greater the distances, the more distinct the stories. Further, the box would reveal that on some dimensions, New Testament texts portray similarities, while on others, they differ significantly. The space between points becomes just as important as the points themselves for recognizing the complexity of New Testament messages. The differences are just as important as the similarities for filling out the image of Jesus.

Seeing the Faces of Jesus

I am not suggesting that these are the only, or even the most important, narrative themes. Instead, they simply illustrate the complexity of images emerging from the texts. Obviously, there are many other important narrative dimensions that should be included, such as apocalyptic versus non-apocalyptic emphases or the Jewish versus Gentile orientation of the text. Unfortunately, it is difficult to picture more than three dimensions. As an alternative, we might come up with multiple boxes. Suffice it to say that with each additional dimension, our comparative picture of the faces of Jesus in the New Testament becomes ever more complex.

Finally, if we add into our comparative boxes the relative positions of extra-biblical texts and subsequent creeds and confessions, we should begin to comprehend how Old Story Christianity evolved from the multiple and divergent faces of Jesus. Two examples here should be sufficient to illustrate my point. First, it is common knowledge now that the doctrine of the Trinity is not articulated in the New Testament. Rather, it is a product of the Nicene Creed of the fourth century. Jesus' divine, coexistent, consubstantial equality with the Father (and Holy Spirit) as God is not the same as the Gospel of John's depiction of Jesus as the eternal Word. The Nicene picture of Jesus bursts the imaginative

limits of John and sets up a novel set of categories, as is demonstrated by the fact that the Nicene creed had no biblical language to use in its formulation of Jesus' nature. Instead, it had to rely on terms from Greek philosophy. So, the trinitarian face of Jesus looks sort of like the face of John's Jesus. But, from a different angle, it is substantially different.

The other example is the face of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb who died as a substitute for everyone's sins, which I'll call the substitutionary face of Jesus. His blood is a substitute for all repentant sinners, satisfying the just penalty for humanity's sins demanded by God's righteous nature, as sung about in Old Story Christianity.⁴ Just like the trinitarian face of Jesus, the substitutionary face of Jesus does not appear in the New Testament. Instead, it first appears about one thousand years later. Anselm of Canterbury first articulated this face of Jesus in 1097 in his book *Cur Deus Homo?*⁵ In it he asks why God had to become incarnate in Jesus. The answer is that human sin was an absolute insult to God's very being. The purpose of creation and honor of God had been violated, an offense for which satisfaction was necessary. However, humanity was incapable of matching the effrontery to God's nature with the requisite compensation for the insult to God's honor and purpose. Only Christ, God's Son, by his voluntary, sinless death on the cross, more than satisfied God's justice. As a consequence, Christ provided more than enough merit by his death to effect the reconciliation of all sinners with God. However, the idea that blood sacrifice provided a meritorious substitute was utterly alien to both the Jewish temple theology and ordinary Jewish adherents, including those who composed the New Testament texts. While the substitutionary face looks superficially similar to that of the book of Hebrews, Jesus as the divine-human substitute for the sins of humanity is categorically different from the face of Jesus found in Hebrews. The substitutionary face is not intrinsic to the Bible but evolved over many centuries after the composition of the New Testament.

If we return to just the New Testament texts and where they fall on each dimension, something else becomes apparent when we place all these separate faces of Jesus in comparison with one another. No matter how we rearrange the narrative dimensions, comparing different combinations resulting in different configurations of boxes, the results do not yield coherent three-dimensional faces of Jesus. Instead, they yield patterns or traces that appear through the various arrangements of similarities and differences. The faces of Jesus unique to each text disappear into an array of metaphorical references, that is, similarities-in-difference. We end up with traces, rather than faces, of Jesus.

Old Story Christianity's narrative is not illegitimate, no more so than Matthew's, Paul's, or James'. Old Story Christianity just doesn't tell the whole story. Instead, it is

the product of adding layers of interpretation and tradition upon what are already layers of tradition comprising the New Testament. There is no such thing as the one, whole, true story of Jesus. Instead, we have multiple stories of Jesus that await our attention and that potentially can awaken us to new ways of appropriating the world of these old stories. In their own ways, each had creative, sustaining power for the communities that originally rehearsed them as a living witness to Jesus' life and lingering presence among them. As heirs to this rich variety of witnesses, it is up to Christians today to discern how to relate to the spirit of Jesus disclosed in the texts.

Jesus as Symbol and Spirit

Uncovering the historical Jesus from the layers of tradition is like peeling an onion. When all the layers are peeled away, there is no core left. Nothing remains but burning eyes and runny nose. Only the essence of the onion lingers. Similarly, looking for the core of the "real" Jesus in the multitude of New Testament and later traditions is misguided. What is the spirit of Jesus that lingers in the texts, like the savor of an onion when its layers are peeled away? I propose that it is discerned through listening to the many stories of Jesus in their diversity. "Finding Jesus" is neither a historical nor objective possibility. What is possible is finding *traces* of Jesus disclosed in the plurality of New Testament stories and the cumulative Christian tradition. In them, we can still savor the lingering spirit of Jesus. In them, we encounter his symbolic significance for shaping Christian life.

In other words, the biblical memories about Jesus do not necessarily capture what he really was and did. Instead, a plurality of meanings became attached to the memory of the historical Jesus that have obscured who he really was. But the additional meanings exploded into multiple possibilities of what he could mean to those who followed in his tradition. In place of a biographically accurate personage, Jesus has become a symbol whose multivalent meanings have enabled Christians from many centuries, perspectives, settings, and cultures to encounter God, to make sense of life and the world around them, and then to live courageously and compassionately in the world.

It would be erroneous to undermine Jesus' significance by protesting that he has become just a symbol. Symbols are powerful, giving voice to real experiences that transcend literal signification. As Jesus' followers today identify with his deeds and teachings that are "remembered" in the diverse testimonies of the New Testament, they can find the spirit of Jesus who announced the nearness of God's reign. They might explain Jesus' meaning in diverse, sometimes even contradictory, ways but they share a common focus: in Jesus God has come close and his followers are united

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with God and one another. The power of the symbol enables one to identify with the horizons of meaning that the stories and testimonies about Jesus disclose. In this imaginative encounter with the Bible, Christians encounter the spirit of Jesus.

Whether one interprets the living Jesus literally or symbolically is not so important as whether, in either interpretation, the living Jesus can become a model for facing the mysteries of life by encountering God's life-giving presence still active among those who trust Jesus' spirit. Christians encounter that spirit when in reverence they embrace the eternal presence of mystery; awaken to the ethos of compassion, justice, and love moving through the stories of Jesus' life and teachings; and labor together for a world that cares for all without barriers and boundaries.

In the very diversity of traces found in the New Testament, Christians can still appreciate, apprehend, and appropriate the spirit of Jesus. If they allow the texts to speak in their own unique voices and open themselves to the plurality of meanings disclosed in the different stories, Christians can encounter the rich symbolic tapestry of Jesus in the Bible and the world of meaning that the spirit of Jesus discloses. Once they recognize the plurality of stories about Jesus in the New Testament, they should be much more eager to listen to other ancient stories of Jesus that were ultimately excluded from the Christian canon. In addition, they will not simply dismiss out of hand stories from their peers who report that they "have seen Jesus" in one way or another. Finally, they should be inclined to listen sensitively to stories that are not about Jesus but are holy stories nevertheless. Oftentimes, Christians will be able to hear them as familiar to their own. Other times, they will hear them challenging Christians to listen to their stories of Jesus in different ways. In particular, Christians do their own story of Jesus an injustice if they cannot listen to their neighbors' stories that are shaped by Jewish, Muslim,

Buddhist, Hindu, Native American, and other sacred texts and traditions. **4R**

Endnotes

1. Frances J. Crosby, "Tell Me the Story of Jesus," originally published in *The Quiver of Sacred Song* by William Kirkpatrick and John Sweeney (John Hood, 1880).

2. For a thorough treatment of Paul's undisputed letters, see Arthur Dewey et al., *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning* (Polebridge, 2010), which also introduces the Scholars Version (SV) of Paul's undisputed letters to accompany the SV translation of the gospels.

3. For example, Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, eds., *The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission* (Westminster John Knox, 2001). This is not the place to go into a critical discussion of the authorship and provenance of the epistle. Suffice it to say for now that James has recently been the beneficiary of intentional scholarly retrieval from centuries of neglect caused by Augustinian and Protestant bias against it.

4. For a much more comprehensive discussion of how the meaning of Jesus' death has changed, including the points I make here, see Marcus Borg, "The Death of Jesus," in *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored* (HarperOne, 2007), 97–105. Borg analyzes twenty-two concepts from salvation, John 3:16, and heaven, to the Trinity, the Lord's Supper and the Lord's Prayer. Anyone wanting to see how evolving tradition influences biblical interpretation will find this book eminently helpful.

5. Peter Schmiechen in *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Eerdmans, 2005), 194–221, argues that Anselm's theory is actually not substitutionary but concedes that Anselm's work has generally and consistently been misread as such, beginning with Peter Abelard and persisting into the present, such as by Gustaf Aulén's magisterial articulation of three kinds of atonement theories in his influential *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (S.P.C.K., 1931).



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