BETWEEN BARTH AND WITTGENSTEIN: ON THE AVAILABILITY OF HANS FREI'S LATER THEOLOGY

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Hans Frei's work on the concept of narrative in theology and scriptural interpretation is notoriously challenging. Recent treatments have highlighted, in particular, the way that Frei's account of scriptural meaning appears to diverge problematically over the course of his career, thereby creating the impression of two distinct phases of his work. Frei's early work is commonly understood to locate the meaning of biblical narrative in the structures of those texts. "The meaning, pattern, or theme, whether upon literal or figural reading or, most likely, upon a combination of both, emerges solely as a function of the narrative itself," Dan Stiver quotes a passage from roughly the mid-point of Frei's career. "It is not imprinted on the text by the interpreter or by a multifarious interpretive and religious 'tradition'. . . ."[1] In these passages Stiver reads Frei as rejecting outright such hermeneutical options as reader-response theory and Gadamer's "fusion of horizons." Stiver responds critically:

> Frei does not here take into account the way in which tradition and preunderstandings do not get in the way of but actually open up the meaning of the text and the way in which the reader inevitably is a creative participant in following the lead established by the text. Nor does he recognize the critical dimension of such hermeneutics that helps to avoid unconscious ideological distortion and a replacement of the text by the prejudices of the reader.[2]

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Stiver goes on to point out that certain emphases in Frei's later work lead in the opposite direction—"to a sociological approach which suggests that a community shaped by a particular tradition can become the virtual arbiter of what a text can mean."[3] He pinpoints trends in Frei's thinking that associate scripture's meaning with the *uses* of that text within communities of faith. "We can therefore go in two different directions with Frei," Stiver concludes. "One emphasizes the sufficiency of the immanent meanings of the text, the other emphasizes the community of faith as determining the meaning of the text."[4]

This apparent divergence in Frei's thinking about the meaning of biblical narrative has generally inspired two responses from friendly readers and critics alike. The first such response identifies this divergence as a discrepancy, and attributes it either to simple self-contradiction or perhaps inevitable tensions owing to the un-systematic character of Frei's thinking. A second response attributes it to a "conceptual turn" that Frei's thought underwent at roughly the mid-point of his career. According to the latter version, Frei turned from an essentialist understanding of scriptural meaning to a social and practical account far more attentive to the uses of the biblical text within ecclesial contexts. The later, distinctively sociological developments in Frei's thinking are often attributed to the influence of his colleague at Yale, George Lindbeck.[5]

Lindbeck famously formulated his "cultural-linguistic" account of religion in *The Nature of Doctrine*, deploying insights that he cobbled together from Ludwig Wittgenstein, Clifford Geertz and Thomas Kuhn.[6] Religion, he claimed, is like a culture or language—a framework "that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments."[7] Similarly, in his work of the mid-seventies and eighties, Frei came to draw upon resources from Geertz and Wittgenstein in order to redescribe the Christian church as a set of cultural practices. Moreover, his use of these insights appeared to coincide with his having reframed Scripture's "meaning" as a function of the way that text is used by particular readers at particular times and places. It is common among Frei's readers to identify these developments as the marks of his "turn" to a cultural-linguistic framework. They are thought to reflect perhaps the most salient difference between Frei's *earlier* and *later* work.[8]

Recent readings of Frei's work have attempted to improve upon these dichotomous options. In the first book-length treatment of Frei's theology, for instance, Mike Higton softens the stark distinction between "earlier" and "later" Frei.[9] Higton resists the common account that would identify the "cultural-linguistic" developments in Frei's thinking as either equivalent to, or deriving from, Lindbeck's articulation of those categories. In particular, he points to a crucial distinction between Lindbeck's use of general philosophical insights to frame a theory of religion within which Christianity presents a distinctive instance, and the Christological ground

and goal that orient Frei's sociological redescriptions of Christian scriptural practices.[10] Moreover, rather than position his later work as an independent project that stands on the far side of a turn or break with his earlier thinking, Higton reads Frei as having shifted his attention to ecclesial contexts at the mid-point of his career. Frei accomplished this re-positioning, in part, by simplifying the "methodological scaffolding" that had surrounded his earlier account of biblical narrative.[11] "Frei's aim in all this later work," Higton explains, "was to bring theology more closely into contact with the ordinary practices of Christian communities in our world, and to clear away that great methodological thicket which too often separates theological experts from the believing communities they intend to serve."[12] Higton characterizes this change in Frei's writing as largely stylistic in character—from a "purely intellectual" form to a style more "sociologically aware of itself."[13] This shift was, in turn, "accompanied and supported by a clarification of the ordinary, practical, ecclesial grounds of theology, a clarification which involved Frei distancing himself from some aspects of his original, more theoretical grounding of dogmatic theology," Higton writes, "and his re-establishment of a slightly altered version of his theology on new ground, 'cultural-linguistic' and theological."[14]

The virtues of this account are several. First, it makes clear that Frei's emphasis of the historical character of concepts and practical nature of concept-use served his theological aims. Secondly, it reflects how Frei articulated his attention to historical contingency and social location with increasing explicitness throughout his writing of the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, this account strives to discern a basic coherence in the development of Frei's thought by refusing to treat the later work as an independent project. And yet, even in light of the refined account that Higton provides, the reasons that Frei re-located his theology on new, "cultural-linguistic" ground at mid-career remain puzzling.[15] In fact, fully accounting for these sociological developments in Frei's thinking has consistently proven to be difficult.[16] This difficulty should come as no surprise. Several of the writings in which Frei most explicitly and articulately reflected upon those developments were still in progress at the time of his death.[17] With great sensitivity to this fact Higton opts to treat Frei's later work as *commentary* upon his earlier work. "In the absence of the more substantial work that Frei would have gone on to produce had he not died so suddenly, I think his later work is most appropriately presented as commentary upon his earlier work, rather than as an independent project," Higton cautions his readers.[18] Construed as commentary, the later work is to be treated as clarifying and qualifying Frei's thinking of the 1960s and early 1970s. Higton then cautiously sets out to explicate how Frei's later "modifications" of his earlier work offer insight into his "original intentions," and accordingly, restrains his treatment of this dimension of Frei's work to a single (albeit rigorous) chapter.[19]

In the following pages I explore the possibility that emphasizing the role of Frei's later work as commentary upon the earlier might unnecessarily constrain the possibilities for grasping its full reach and significance. Perhaps more importantly, so situating that work might inhibit the prospects for expanding upon and carrying forward the important innovations that Frei developed in the final decade of his career. Are the only available options to either frame Frei's work of the 1980s as *commentary* or as an *independent project*? Is his later work merely a "cultural-linguistic correction" of his earlier claim that "the Bible means what it says?"[20] Might there be some way to re-orient and enrich our grasp of Frei's work that sidesteps this apparent dilemma? I propose to further refine the account of the development of Frei's theology by exploring the extent to which "cultural-linguistic" insights do—or do not—present "new ground" upon which Frei re-located his theology during the mid-to-late 1970s. I make the case that, rather than presenting us with points on which Frei distanced his later thinking from his earlier, Frei's pragmatic and sociological concerns actually present important continuous threads in his thinking from early to late. In particular, I demonstrate that several of the so-called "cultural-linguistic" insights usually identified as the marks of Frei's *later* work are, in fact, central to his thinking as far back as the early 1960s. I aim to show that the developmental character of Frei's work over the course of his career exhibits a coherent trajectory from earlier to later—a trajectory that is consistently Wittgensteinian in sensibility, and indebted to his career-long conversation with Karl Barth's theology. Reading Frei with attention to the full reach of these insights may permit us to avoid the apparent dilemma of positioning that work as either an independent project, or solely as commentary upon—merely criticism of—the earlier.

If successful, the reading I propose here may help resolve the persistently vexing motivations and sources of Frei's apparent turn to "cultural-linguistic" insights. Viewed in genealogical perspective, insights usually considered novel to Frei's later work become, instead, the results of increasingly precise articulation of—and expansion upon—a set of ideas and a trajectory of thought that Frei had been working through and refining since fairly early in his career. Clearly, such developments include moments of adjustment and critical revision. Nonetheless, the fact that we have much of Frei's later material only as it was in progress at the time of his death turns out to be no special reason to treat it hesitantly. In fact, its "in progress" character becomes largely consistent in tenor with the rest of Frei's work. Frei was constantly in motion as a thinker—self-critical of his best insights, revising, gleaning new insights from his colleagues and students. Ultimately, refining the precision of our grasp of this dimension of his work should illuminate how the recurring "in progress" character of Frei's work is, in fact, one of its several virtues. So positioning Frei should provide a clearer picture of the kind of thinker that he was—one whose

thinking about a set of material insights and conceptual tools unfolded in a "lengthy, even leisurely" manner over the course of several decades. If successful, this reading will demonstrate that Frei's early work is far more innovative, and his later work far less derivative, than is often recognized.

The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology

Frei's aversion to theoretical systems is nowhere more evident than in his approach to the practice of reading scripture. Frei followed Barth in claiming that Scripture was the cornerstone of Christian faith because it manifests a person to its readers—the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, any doctrine saying as much had to be based upon, and point back to, Scripture's witness. Understanding Scripture's account of Jesus, as Frei saw it, could not finally depend upon any particular pre-understanding on the part of the reader—his or her perspective, life-experience or even "reading through the eyes of faith." Imposing such categories upon the text would obscure, or dangerously "anthropocentrize," its witness.

At the same time, Frei recognized—as Barth had—that readers do not approach scripture in a conceptual vacuum. Some concepts and categories are necessary for the very possibilities of reading, understanding and interpreting scripture in the first place. "[I]t is really quite impossible for us to free ourselves of our own shadow," Barth had written, "that is, to make the so-called *sacrificium intellectus*" by attempting to alleviate ourselves of the "external" influences of every set of concepts, interests, purposes and perspective—somehow assuming a "view from nowhere"—prior to taking up and reading Scripture. Barth continued:

> Even in what [a reader] says as an observer and exponent [of what Scripture declares to us], he will everywhere betray the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, in cultured or primitive fashion, consistently or inconsistently, he has approached the text from the standpoint of a particular epistemology, logic or ethics, of definite ideas and ideals concerning the relations of God, the world and man, and that in reading and expounding the text he cannot simply deny these. Everyone has some sort of philosophy, i.e., a personal view of the fundamental nature and relationship of things—however popular, aphoristic, irregular and eclectically vacillating.[21]

Frei recognized that Barth did not fashion a "rule" or static criterion according to which the concepts that make possible a reader's initial apprehension of Scripture must somehow arise from within Scripture itself—a principled stand against all forms of "extratextuality." Barth's claims are far more subtle and complex than that. "[W]e cannot basically contest the use of philosophy in scriptural exegesis," he wrote. "Where the

question of legitimacy arises is in regard to the *How* of this use."[22] To a great extent, it was this *how* of scriptural exegesis that Frei explored in his 1967 cycle of essays, later published as *The Identity of Jesus Christ*.[23]

Frei's investigation of the *how* of biblical exegesis highlighted an apparent dilemma. On one hand, he confronted the complex indispensability-yet-ultimate-inadequacy of non-scriptural concepts and categories. On the other hand, as Barth had pointed out, the name of Jesus Christ is the object mirrored in the biblical texts—the person and work concretely set forth in evangelical witness and apostolic proclamation. "These texts can be understood only when understood as determined by this object," Barth had written.[24] Frei proposed to navigate this apparent dilemma by remaining as formal as possible with the concepts and categories used to read and enrich the gospels' renderings of Jesus. All too frequently, he thought, such schemes are employed in ways that ultimately overwhelm that subject matter.[25] When this happens, reading and interpretation become abstracted from the concrete renderings of Christ that the scriptural narratives portray. However, if kept "suitably formal," extra-scriptural interpretive insights and tools might "enable us to see who Jesus is without determining better than the text itself the meaning and importance of what the Gospels have to say about him."[26]

The theoretical delicacy characteristic of Frei's approach to biblical exegesis is similar to his approach to hermeneutics. In *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei sketched a notion of "hermeneutics" in "the old-fashioned, rather narrow, and low-keyed manner as the rules and principles for determining the sense of written texts, or the rules and principles governing exegesis."[27] With this unobtrusive approach in mind, Frei set out to demonstrate the kinds of tools he thought most appropriate specifically for scriptural exegesis—tools for opening up, redescribing, critically reflecting upon, yet ultimately pointing back to Who the biblical texts concretely portray. In a crucial clarification of this account Frei wrote:

> The aim of an exegesis which simply looks for the sense of a story (but does not identify sense with religious significance for the reader) is in the final analysis that of reading the story itself. We ask if we agree on what we find there, and we discover its patterns to one another. And therefore the theoretical devices we use to make our reading more alert, appropriate and intelligent ought to be designed to leave the story itself as unencumbered as possible.[28]

In avoiding the "religious significance" for readers, Frei sought to evade the modern tendency to locate the revelatory significance in the reader's personal response, or experience, elicited by these stories. He sought to avoid this and other such theoretical impositions upon the subject matter by remaining as formal as possible in his approach to meaning and understanding in the practice of reading Scripture. To accomplish this, Frei

administered his interpretive interests and purposes, and his theoretical tools in piecemeal, occasional and ad hoc ways. Moreover, Frei cautioned readers to expect to have their categories, interpretive schemes and expectations scrambled from time to time by the One who confronts them in these stories.

While the relationship between the methodological concerns and the subject matter of the Scriptural texts is necessarily delicate for Frei, it is nonetheless delicately necessary. In other words, Frei's methodological concerns are a central feature of the priority that he gives to the biblical narratives. These methodological concerns must be properly ordered vis-à-vis the priority of the biblical witness, but neither can be abstracted from the other. For Frei, biblical hermeneutics is *praxis*—theoretically delicate reflection upon the concrete and locally embodied practices of reading and consulting scripture. When considered in the light of their narrative form, the biblical accounts of Christ's life, death and resurrection bid their readers to identify appropriate redescriptive tools, and then employ those tools in ways that open and further illuminate the Person who comes to believers in and through these stories. Thus, Frei's tools and his approach are normed by his subject matter—namely, the unity of narrative form and Christological content of the gospels' stories.[29]

It was in Frei's methodological reflections of the 1960s that his insights about the historical character of concepts, linguistic practices, and the social and practical constitution of the church, began to surface. These appear perhaps nowhere more explicitly than in the conceptual tools with which he expanded his theological claims. In his "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal" of 1967, for instance, Frei cited the increasing influence of the philosopher he would consult as the primary resource for redescribing what he took to be Barth's chief historicist insights.[30] By Frei's own account, as early as 1962 he had been earnestly reading this thinker—arguably the philosopher of historicized concepts and situated practices *par excellence*—Ludwig Wittgenstein.[31] Frei recounted drawing two general insights from his earliest encounters with Wittgenstein's work. "First, it described how we actually use language in ordinary conversation and so weaned me from a specialized vocabulary and thought form both for philosophy and theology," he reported. "Second, it weaned me away from high-flown ontological reflection in order to understand theology."[32] If we take Frei at his word here, then as early as the mid-1960s he concerned himself with ordinary social practices like concept- and language-use, and sought to sidestep theoretically weighty claims in his theology. In other words, the "methodological scaffolding" surrounding his work at that time may not have set the theological expert so far apart from the community of believers after all. If this is correct, then it remains to be seen just how Frei's work at that time demonstrates these basic interests and purposes.

In several essays of the 1960s, Wittgenstein's influence on Frei explicitly surfaces in his description of the narrative portrayal of Christ's identity, as well as the public and social institution of ecclesial contexts and practices. Moreover, the redescriptive tools he used to articulate these insights— drawn largely from the Oxford University philosopher of mind, Gilbert Ryle—materially implicate the insights he would later explicitly identify with Wittgenstein and with the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. It is in highlighting these connections that we might trace a continuity of approach running through the apparent divergence in Frei's thinking that leads many readers to set apart the "earlier" and "later" Frei.

In his article "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," and again in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei articulated a social and practical conception of Christ's identity. The gospel accounts of Christ's identity, on his view, do not rely upon such modern philosophical notions as "inner intention," "consciousness," or "self-presence." Rather, they portray Christ's identity in the publicly available, socially situated mutual interaction of character, circumstance and theme.[33] Frei employed Ryle's criticisms of "the ghost in the machine" account of intentionality in order to bypass construing "consciousness" as "a perspective on the world" anchoring an agent's "intention," and thus, the *real* meaning of his actions and *true* seat of his identity.[34] In other words, he displaced the notion of "inner lives" with what characters in the biblical narratives do as they interact with the circumstances confronting them.

In the Preface to *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative,* Frei identified Ryle and Erich Auerbach, along with Barth, as the primary influences on this thinking up to that point.[35] This 1974 citation reflects roughly a decade of their influence on his work. Frei first read Auerbach's classic text, *Mimesis,* in 1964. He acquired his grasp of Ryle's work while advising a dissertation by his student Robert H. King entitled *The Concept of Personal Agency as a Theological Model* (1965).[36] In light of insights that he drew from Ryle, Peter Strawson, and Elizabeth Anscombe's *Intention*, by the mid 1960s Frei began characterizing the intentions and actions of characters in the biblical narratives (along with their thought and speech) as unified—"causal knowledge internally connected with bodily movement in an external context."[37] He worked to bring *intention* and *identity* out of the internal space of "consciousness."[38] "[F]or descriptive purposes," he wrote, "a person's uniqueness is not attributable to a super-added factor, an invisible agent residing inside and from there directing the body."[39] Rather "intention and action logically involve each other in verbal usage," he wrote, highlighting the linguistic character of this descriptive account.[40] For Frei's exegetical purposes, this meant that the events and persons at the surface of the gospel accounts present themselves to their readers in virtue of the public interactions of the socially constituted characters and practically generated circumstances portrayed there.[41] In

other words, Ryle's public conception of identity located the meaning of the text in the world wrought *in* and *through* the narrative shape of the story. From this Frei extrapolated:

> [N]either from the side of paying attention to oneself nor from that of paying heed to what others are about is it necessary to enter a mysterious realm of being and meaning, or an equally mysterious private-subject world in order to discover what makes any intelligent action publicly or commonly intelligible. Especially in narrative, novelistic, or history-like form, where meaning is most nearly inseparable from the words—from the descriptive shape of the story as a pattern of enactment, there is neither need for nor use in looking for meaning in a more profound stratum underneath the structure (a separable "subject matter") or in a separable author's "intention," or in a combination of such behind-the-scenes projections.[42]

Does Frei's use of these philosophical tools implicate him in general anthropological theory? Do they conflict with his effort to remain theoretically unencumbered in order to grant priority to the gospel accounts? The reason that it does *not* is apparent in how Frei responded to the criticisms frequently leveled at Ryle's project when it was treated as a general, explanatory theory.

Frei was acutely aware that in his attack on "the ghost in the machine" Ryle appeared to go so far as to deny the very possibility of "inner episodes," and perhaps any conception of "interiority" whatsoever. Ryle viewed all talk of "mind" and "mental states" as metaphysically tainted with the Cartesian picture of an animating ghost. Critics labeled his position a form of "behaviorism" because it allegedly reduced all talk of "mental processes" and cognition to forms of behavior. Moreover, Ryle never fully refuted the charge that his account rendered meaningful action "non-cognitive," nor that he reduced talk about minds to merely a different way of talking about bodies caught up in habitual, material processes.[43] Frei found the full extent of these claims oddly counter-intuitive. "There is a real or hypothetical 'inside' description of that transition [from intention to action]," he wrote, "of which all of us are aware but of which it is not easy to give an account."[44] However, Frei was convinced that to theorize an explanation of this occurrence would overpower the subject matter that the gospels portrayed. He thought that behaviorist charges would surface only against the background of an attempt to *systematically* explain intention and action. Frei sought to sidestep the behaviorist quandary by deploying Ryle's conception of "intention-action description" for his own theological purposes. In other words, he used Ryle's insights as ad hoc tools for *redescribing* the content of the gospel narratives in light of their particular form. "It is my conviction that the interaction of character and circumstance, subject and object, inner and outer human being cannot be

explained," Frei wrote. "But it can be described, and that is the point," he continued, "One can, up to a point—and only up to a point—render a description, but not a metaphysics, of such interactive unity. It is done by the rendering of certain formal categories; but finally, the categories themselves are outstripped, and then all one can and must do is narrate the unity."[45]

In his Conclusion to *The Identity of Jesus Christ* Frei expanded his conception of the world depicted in scripture to embrace not merely authors and readers, but the church as well.[46] Having first applied Ryle's account to the characters and circumstances in the gospel narratives, he then expanded that account of 'intention-action description' to include the intentional actions of the gospel writers in writing these texts, as well as the life of the church. "'[T]o perform intelligently is to do one thing and not two things'," Frei quoted Ryle. "And this is as much to be remembered in the reading of texts as in understanding any other intelligent activity."[47] In other words, the gospel writers mean what they say. We do not need to presume that the author's *true* intention somehow stands hidden within or behind the account that he provides, any more than we need to deduce psychologically the genuine intentions of the characters whose actions the gospel accounts narratively render. By applying these redescriptive tools to the life of the church, Frei construed it as gathered around and oriented by its historically situated and extended engagement with—and gathering under—the biblical witness.[48] In his final essay of his 1967 cycle, Frei wrote:

> [T]he church has a history, indeed it is nothing other than its as yet unfinished history transpiring from event to event. The identity description that we applied to Jesus in the Gospels must, to a lesser extent and in merely analogous fashion, be applied also to the church as his people. . . . Jesus' identity was the intention-action sequence in which he came to be who he was. His being had to be narrated, as historians and novelists must always narrate the matters they describe. He was constituted by the interaction of his character and circumstances. So also is the church. Like Jesus, like the people of Israel, the church is its history, its passage from event to event in a mysterious pattern that is dictated neither by a mechanical fate nor by an inner and necessary rhythm of the human psyche.[49]

The redescriptive insights Frei drew from Ryle's text *The Concept of Mind* present a point at which Wittgenstein exerted crucial influence upon Frei's thinking during the late 1960s.[50] In fact, many of the central insights in Ryle's text of 1949 owe much to Wittgenstein's later thought, even well before the *Philosophical Investigations* appeared in print in 1953.[51]

Ryle and Wittgenstein first met at a Joint Session of the Mind Association and the Aristotelian Society in 1929, and later at meetings of the Moral

Sciences Club at Cambridge. By the early 1930s Ryle recounts having long conversations with Wittgenstein about the issues and concerns that would come to be known as his "later thought." Along with just a few others, Ryle was in a unique position to work through these ideas as a student and young professor. The ideas Wittgenstein shared with him in their many conversations of the 1930s and 40s were otherwise in extremely limited circulation beyond the immediate Oxbridge context until the publication of the *Philosophical Investigations*.[52]

Though the influences are considerable, to characterize Ryle as a follower of Wittgenstein would overstate the case.[53] Characterizing Frei as a card-carrying Wittgensteinian would be equally erroneous. My account has a stake in neither of these claims. Yet, the insights that Frei borrowed from Ryle bear considerable family resemblances to Wittgenstein's later thought, and reflect his influence—resemblances that Frei himself recognized.[54] Frei draws freely and innovatively upon these tools insofar as they aid his theological interests and purposes—at least, that is, until those tools are finally outstripped. For instance, Frei gradually came to refer to the church as a social organism, and found it helpful to describe the theological task as analogous to non-reductive, reflexive ethnography.[55] Much like he had treated the gospel accounts of Christ's identity, he sought not to *explain* or *justify* the practices and understandings uniquely constitutive of the church. He sought, rather, to *describe* them for purposes that ranged from clarification and conceptual enrichment, to intellectual devotion, to criticism and commentary, to inter-disciplinary conversation. And, in fact, Frei likened this redescriptive approach in theology to what Geertz had famously labeled "thick description."[56]

Frei's borrowing from Geertz to redescribe the church and the theological task is another important marker in the development of this thinking. Geertz's influence appears most explicitly in his "'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative" essay and the materials published posthumously as *Types of Christian Theology*.[57] His ethnographic insights helped Frei become increasingly precise in his explication of the inseparability of the theological task and the contextually situated practices of the church, again in noticeably Wittgensteinian terms. In fact, the extent to which Geertz's account of "thick description" reflects Wittgenstein's influence may be one of the most overlooked facets of that ethnographic approach. Only several decades after *The Interpretation of Cultures* was published would Geertz explicitly reflect on the influence that Wittgenstein exerted upon his thinking:

[W]ittgenstein's attack upon the idea of a private language, which brought thought out of its grotto in the head into the public square where one could look at it. . . . [His] notion of a language game, which provided a new way of looking at [thought] once it arrived [in the

public square]—*as a set of practices* . . . and his proposal of "forms of life" as (to quote one commentator) the complex of natural and cultural circumstances which are presupposed in . . . any particular understanding of the world, seem almost custom designed to enable the sort of anthropological study I, and others of my ilk, do.[58]

Frei ceased to invoke Ryle and Auerbach in his later writings as explicitly as before, though he did not part with the central insights he had drawn from them. In fact, Frei clearly states in his later work that Geertz's conceptions of meaning, culture, and interpretive approach to descriptive analysis most appealed to him at precisely those points at which Geertz carries forward ideas drawn from Ryle and Wittgenstein.[59] Geertz provided Frei a social and practical framework for thinking of culture that complements the intention-action construal of character and identity that Frei had earlier derived from Ryle and Auerbach.[60] Both of these accounts presuppose a social and practical conception of the context and action in which people "act intelligently" in virtue of interacting in and coping with the practical circumstances in which they find themselves. These tools helped Frei to position the practices of reading and consulting scripture as practices within—and unique to—the social organism of the Christian Church.

Of course, Frei's thinking evolved in important ways as it proceeded along the trajectory described above. For instance, he came to temper his earlier reliance upon the notion of realistic narrative out of concern that it gave priority to a general literary category. He feared that insufficiently nuanced claims about the nature of this literary genre risked over-powering the biblical story's rendering of the person of Christ. In particular, Frei grappled with the temptation to, *first,* establish the basic structure and function of realistic narratives and, *second*, read the gospel accounts as a particular instance of those dimensions of the narrative. This risked conferring normative priority to the literary category.[61] And yet, Frei nonetheless preserved a normatively Christological sense to the surface of the biblical accounts even as he softened his use of literary categories to redescribe them. In other words, his work of the 1980s reconciled his earlier claims for the priority of the plainly Christological character of these history-like (formerly "realistic") narratives with his increasingly explicit articulation of the social-practical character of engaging Scripture. This development in Frei's thinking takes the form of enriching and expanding his conceptual framework—broadening his focus, rather than executing a "turn" from, or "break" with, his earlier claims—an expansion "from Word to Word *and* Spirit."[62] Frei nuanced his earlier construal of realistic narrative by appealing to the *sensus literalis* or "literal sense" of Scripture.

The literal sense characterized Scripture's "basic ascriptive Christological sense"—the sense in which "the subject matter of these stories is not

something or someone else, and that the rest of the canon must in some way or ways, looser or tighter, be related to this subject matter or at least not in contradiction to it."[63] This enabled Frei to attend to the influence that interpretive context bears upon the practices of engaging scripture with increasing explicitness. In particular, he pinpointed the ascriptive Christological sense as a basic point of normative orientation—often practically embodied and informally articulated, yet in some variation or other non-negotiable—by which Christian reading of the Christian Scriptures had been identified as Christian.[64]

And yet, while Frei softened his account of the structures characteristic of realistic narrative, he did not jettison that concept as a redescriptive tool. In fact, he continued in his latest writings to draw an analogy between the plain sense of the biblical narratives and the history-likeness of realistic novels. However, he drew this comparison without deference to realistic narrative as the general category or genre of which the "formal literary structures" of the Gospel narratives present an instance.[65] "There really is an analogy between the Bible and a novel writer who says something like this: I mean what I say. It's as simple as that: the text means what it says," Frei persisted. "Now that doesn't mean that there aren't metaphors there. It doesn't mean that I take every account literally. But it does mean that I cannot take the biblical story, the gospel story especially, in separation from its being the identification, the literal identification of someone identified as Jesus of Nazareth. It's not about something else, not about somebody else."[66] Thus, Frei struck a balance between his emphasis on the subject matter and form of the narrative accounts, on one hand, and his increasingly explicit attention to contexts of use, on the other. He framed the *sensus literalis* as a complex combination of use-in-context and the "unity of grammatical/syntactical sense and signified subject."[67] He identified the stories portrayed by the biblical text as, in part, enabled by all the grammatical and syntactical and literary-literal constraints that constitute being a "text" and, in this case, these accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Moreover, Frei persisted in describing these features of the text in terms of the "narrative rendering of an intention-action sequence" that depicts "a theme through the interaction of character and circumstances"—terms that quite explicitly recall several of his central claims in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*.[68]

At the same time, Frei deployed all the preceding terms with increased sensitivity to the theoretical associations that might follow in their wake.[69] It is crucial to note at this point that this caution on Frei's part neither *precluded* such theoretical associations, nor posed an outright departure from his earlier work. Rather, these cautionary notes clarified that any such theoretical associations must remain oriented by (secondary to, and dependent upon) the priority of the *sensus literalis*—the basic ascriptive Christological sense. Any overly-systematized appeal to realistic narrative

(including Frei's own) would be "dangerously perched" on the brink of general theory, however less theoretically high-powered than grander hermeneutical accounts of "meaning" and "understanding" such an appeal might be.[70] Thus, Frei became more careful than before to avoid identifying the narrative's meaning merely with its "formal structure." Rather, he held the renderings of the gospel narratives in tandem with the socially situated and historically extended interpretive traditions that have been oriented by the centrality of the story of Jesus. This development presents a refined theoretical balance that enabled him to avoid positing Scripture in abstraction from its uses in particular contexts. Simultaneously, however, Frei recognized the danger of the sort of textual functionalism that would *reduce* meaning to use—a form of textual "warranted assertability" in which the text means whatever some community or reader takes it to mean (whatever one's fellow readers will permit one to get away with). "When we disagree in our interpretations of a text," Frei wrote in *Types of Christian Theology*, "it is well to check on what each of us is doing, but it would be silly to do that and not pay attention to the features of the text or act as though it had none or as though they varied simply as our reading of them varied."[71]

In this more refined view, the life of a textually-oriented community and tradition will orbit around its textual practices in varying ways. These will include its explicit practices of interpretation, contestation of different readings of the text, and conceptual redescription for a myriad of purposes—all of which Frei (following Barth) grouped under the task of *meditatio*. These tasks shade into (while remaining logically distinct from) practical application (*applicatio*) of the text's insights, claims and provisions. Frei remained adamant, however, that in the Christian tradition the *explicatio* or reading and listening to the basic *sensus* of the biblical text—"the sheer retelling of the story or other texts, together with philological and other aids that go into that activity for the more technically trained"—maintains priority.[72] It bends the others to itself even as it "stretches" to accommodate a range of redescriptive tools and purposes, and context-specific considerations. "For the first stage [*explicatio*], humdrum though it be, signals the insistence that we can and do read together in the Christian linguistic community and that the text governs us all—in that context. In interpreting conceptually and existentially, we are governed first by the story and, in the second place, by the way it functions in the Christian religion."[73]

As in his work of the 1960s, Frei refused to sidestep all concern for hermeneutics in his later work. Rather, as before, he construed textual interpretation in a manner sufficiently delicate to avoid overwhelming the subject matter of the gospel accounts. " 'Understanding' involves a capacity combining a variety of skills rather than a single unitary phenomenon," Frei wrote in 1982. "Understanding texts may differ in accordance with different texts and their differing contexts."[74] Moreover, he persisted, we

will have to continue to explore what it is to "understand" as a set of technical questions that reflect on situated scriptural practices at a second-order level. These claims bear a great deal of consistency with the account of "understanding" that Frei described in his reflections on *The Identity of Jesus Christ*.[75] Around the time he wrote those articles, he commented:

> In regard to understanding, (remember: for this particular exegetical task!) I find myself influenced increasingly by Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. . . . There is, it seems to me, a variety of descriptions for any given linguistic phenomenon, and hence, above all, no ontological superdescription or explanation. Furthermore, the 'grammar' (use according to rules of such a construct) is more readily exhibited or set forth than stated in the abstract.[76]

Notice that, even at this early point, Frei's account of *understanding* is situation specific. He avoids technically freighted explanatory claims. The difference is that Frei's later formulation reflects a far more refined and explicit attention to the complex interaction of text and context. Frei is increasingly explicit that any such task of interpretation, and second order reflection upon the terms of the interpretive task itself—such as "meaning" and "understanding"—is a set of embodied skills employed on a context-by-context basis. Moreover, he expands his earlier conception of "the world wrought in scriptural narratives," and the sense in which it embraces the historical situation of the church. Thus, Frei came to characterize the communal life of the church as an "acted document"—a historically extended, socially and practically embodied organism that is oriented by the narrative world depictively rendered by its engagements with scripture.[77] Believers are "embodied agents," Frei wrote, "who understand what we do, suffer, and are in the contexts in which we are placed as the world is shaped upon and by us. In that way the gospel story and we ourselves inhabit the same kind of world."[78]

These refined insights about the cultural and historical situated-ness of ecclesial contexts are neither wholly novel to Frei's "later" work, nor do they mark a "turn" or "break" from his "earlier" work. They redescriptively expand and render increasingly explicit his characterization of the church as socially embodied and historically extended in the closing chapters of *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. There Frei had claimed that the identity of that historically extended social organism has to be narrated—that we have it only under some set of descriptive terms—much like the identities of Jesus and the people of Israel.[79] Running throughout his work—early to late—this theme most clearly positioned Frei between Barth and Wittgenstein. Thus he would claim:

> [Barth] suggested that our very knowledge of ourselves as creatures, but even more our very knowledge of ourselves as sinners is a

knowledge, an apprehension, a tactile direct contact that has to be mediated to us. We have to learn it, in an almost Wittgensteinian way. (And there is, incidentally I think for me, a lot of relationship, a lot of similarity between the later Wittgenstein and Karl Barth). We have to learn in an almost Wittgensteinian way how to use the concepts that apply to the way we know ourselves, because the world, the true, real world in which we live—the real world in which the Second World War took place in which Barth was so much engaged, in which the conflict with Nazism took place, in which the conflict or the adjustment with Communism took place later—that real world is only a figure of an aspect in that one overall real world in which the covenanted God of grace lives with man.[80]

 Despite initial appearances, Frei's claims here about the relation of the world known by way of Scripture and "the true world in which we live" do not unequivocally implicate him in Lindbeck's more robust assertions of roughly ten years later that an "intratextual" approach to Christian scripture will "absorb" the world of believers.[81]

 In the final paragraphs of his essay on the "literal reading" of scripture Frei endorsed Lindbeck's description of theology's "intratextual" task as the "normative explication of the meaning a religion has for its adherents."[82] There he suggested that the *sensus literalis* presented the primary reference point for interpretation of an "intratextual" type within the Christian tradition.[83] Of course, even the affinities that Frei identified between his and Lindbeck's claims he utilized in *ad hoc* ways, and for his specific redescriptive purposes. Contemporary readers of Frei's theology do well to take note of this. If we attend to these important passages without careful awareness of the methodological continuities, pragmatic sensibilities, and distinctive theological concerns that had been unfolding in Frei's work for more than two decades, then we risk reading them inadequately.

Conclusion

The foregoing sketch of the development of Frei's thinking should convey a sense of the continuous strands running through the "lengthy, even leisurely unfolding" of his methodological insights and ecclesial interests and purposes from the 1960s onward. When we take as our focus the continuity internal in these developments, the later work presents much more than a set of unfinished fragments, or mere commentary constrained by the substance of what it comments upon. These developments portray, rather, Frei's working out a set of innovative, material insights, and learning to apply a set of conceptual tools and insights with increased adeptness and proficiency over the course of his career. Such a framework accounts for this development without attributing to Frei either standing

self-contradiction, or his having simply corrected his earlier claims in light of Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" theory. Moreover, this framework helps make available the full scope of Frei's theology for the purposes of critical enrichment and expansion. Of course, to force an either/or option in our account of these developments—either exclusively emphasizing the continuities or the discontinuities—would conflict with the spirit of all of Frei's work. Which dimension we stress will depend largely on our own interests and purposes, and other concrete considerations pertinent to the task at hand. But this is precisely the sort of flexibility and attention to concrete particularities that we should expect from the "generous orthodoxy" Frei spent his career working to articulate.[84]

NOTES

1　Dan Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 143 (Stiver's emphasis); cf. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a study in eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 34–35 (hereafter *Eclipse*).

2　*Ibid.*

3　*Ibid.*

4　*Ibid.*, p. 144.

5　For such accounts of the turn in Frei's thinking, see, for instance, George Hunsinger's "Afterword" in Hunsinger and Placher (eds) *Theology and Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 259 (hereafter cited as *T&N*); Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin and Barth read the "Plain Sense" of Genesis 1–3* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 17.

6　George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 32–41.

7　*Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

8　Charles Campbell locates Frei's "turn" to cultural-linguistic theory in Frei's essay "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative" (1982). While this essay predates the publication of Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, Campbell reads Frei's account as basically consistent with the general theory for which Lindbeck's book is famous. See Campbell's *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), Chapter 3 (esp. p. 64, ftn. 5). Kevin Vanhoozer identifies Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* as "the first appearance of the 'cultural-linguistic' turn in theology," and then characterizes Frei's later work as a "cultural-linguistic correction" of his earlier claim "that the Bible means what it says." See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 10–11, 172–173; Paul DeHart perhaps more delicately suggests that "Whatever its sources, this shift in the theory of the 'literal reading' from scripture as narrative 'icon' to socialization into a communal praxis had the result of moving Frei closer to the thought world of George Lindbeck." See Paul DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 26–27.

9　Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence & History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2004).

10　Mike Higton, "Frei's Christology and Lindbeck's Cultural-Linguistic Theory," *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol. 50 no. 1 (1997), pp. 92–95.

11　Higton, *Christ, Providence & History*, p. 178.

12　*Ibid.*

13　*Ibid.*

14　*Ibid.*; Cf. p. 19.

15 Higton proposes that Frei's cultural-linguistic shift reflected his worries in the late 1970s that the historical developments recounted in *Eclipse* needed further supplementation by social and cultural history. *Ibid.*, pp. 178–179.

16 Paul DeHart suggests that some mixture of David Kelsey's text of 1975, *The Uses of Scripture*, and Charles Wood's *The Formation of Christian Understanding* of 1981 introduced the pivotal ideas that catalyzed the shift in Frei's thinking. See DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses*, pp. 26–27. In fact, much earlier in *Eclipse* Frei acknowledged the influence of many of those ideas in Wood's 1972 Yale dissertation—a Wittgensteinian assessment of the strand of hermeneutics stretching from Schleiermacher to Gadamer. See *Eclipse*, pp. 341–342, ftn. 1.

17 Much of Frei's work still in progress at the time of his death was edited by his former students, George Hunsinger and William Placher, and published as *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994). Frei's occasional essays were collected and published in Hunsinger and Placher (eds) *T&N* (1993). In 2004 Mike Higton edited and circulated lecture manuscripts, notes and other occasional writings remaining in Frei's archive under the title *Hans W. Frei: Unpublished Pieces, Transcripts from the Yale Divinity School archive*, http://www.library.yale.edu/div/Freitranscripts/Freicomplete.pdf.

18 Higton, *Christ, Providence & History*, p. 178.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 21. Higton takes up Frei's "later work" in Chapter 8 of his book.

20 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, pp. 10–11, 172–173.

21 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), pp. 727–728 (hereafter cited as *CD*).

22 Barth, *CD I.2*, pp. 729–730 (italics added). Barth followed these claims about the inevitability—and yet, ultimate insufficiency—of some use (however informal) of philosophical and other concepts for the basic comprehension of Scripture with an extensive discussion of several informal guidelines for exegesis. As it turns out, while necessary, both philosophical and theological modes of thought must remain "hypothetical, relative and incidental" in the exposition of the biblical witness. That is, they must be oriented by the subject matter—"the object mirrored in the text" of Scripture. Moreover, precisely what such engagements of Scripture will look like must vary on a case-by-case basis (*Ibid.*, p. 734). Frei explicitly dealt with this complex dimension of Barth's work in the work collected in George Hunsinger and William Placher (eds), *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 84–87, and in the earlier essay, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," (1982) in *T&N*, pp. 110–114.

23 Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975) (hereafter *Identity*, citing the 1997 Wipf & Stock reprint). *Identity* was originally written in 1967 as a series of articles entitled "The Mystery and Presence of Jesus Christ" for *Crossroads,* a Presbyterian journal for laity. In 1975 Frei published these articles as *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, unaltered with the exception of a new "Preface" and an epilogue entitled "A Meditation for the Week of Good Friday and Easter." He composed both additions in 1974.

24 Barth, *CD I.2*, p. 727.

25 Frei, *Identity*, p. 101.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

28 *Ibid*.

29 In other words, Frei's exegetical approach does not entail a principled stand against any and all "extratextual" categories. Moreover, characterizing his work in this way is likely to land Frei in a self-contradictory posture. For instance, if one reads Frei's qualification of "presence" in his later work as correcting an earlier, illicit use of a category because it is "extratextual," one is likely to encounter confusion about all of the other "extratextual" tools the Frei freely deployed in *Identity* and throughout his career without a hint of concern for their "extratextual" origins. Kevin Vanhoozer puzzles over precisely this point in his treatment of Frei in *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Chap 7 (esp. pp. 164–165 and p. 185 ftn. 65).

30 Hans Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," in *T&N*, pp. 32–33. Hereafter cited as "Remarks."

31 Frei identified this date in an interview with John Woolverton in 1975. See John Woolverton, "Hans W. Frei in Context: A Theological and Historical Memoir," *Anglican Theological Review* Vol. LXXIX no. 3 (Summer, 1997), p. 385.

32 *Ibid*.

33 Hans Frei, "The Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," *The Christian Scholar*, Vol. 49, no. 4 (Winter, 1966), pp. 263–306 (especially pp. 46 and 58).

34 Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1949).

35 Frei, *Eclipse*, pp. vii–ix.

36 Robert King's dissertation was later published as *The Idea of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1973).

37 Frei, "Remarks," in *T&N*, p. 35; Cf. "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection" (1966) in *T&N*, pp. 45–93 (here pp. 64–68).

38 Frei, "Remarks," in *T&N*, pp. 36–37.

39 Frei, *Identity,* p. 99.

40 *Ibid*., p. 137.

41 *Ibid*.

42 *Ibid*.

43 Even Ryle's critic and friend, A. J. Ayer, acknowledged that the claim that "all our talk about the mind is translatable into talk about behaviour" is one that Ryle "probably does not hold," in spite of the fact that "his programmatic statements often imply that he does." See A. J. Ayer, "An Honest Ghost?" in *Ryle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Oscar P. Wood and George Pitcher, introduction by Gilbert Ryle, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1970), p. 67.

44 Frei, *Identity*, p. 100.

45 Frei, "Remarks," in *T&N*, p. 35.

46 Frei, *Identity,* pp. 186–195.

47 Frei, *Eclipse*, p. 281 (quoting Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, p. 40, a claim central to Geertz's enterprise as well).

48 Frei, *Identity*, pp. 186–195.

49 *Ibid*., p. 190.

50 John Woolverton, "Hans W. Frei in Context," p. 385.

51 Though not published until after his death in 1953, Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations* was complete by 1945, and Part II by 1949. See Elizabeth Anscombe and Rush Rhees, "Editor's Note," of Anscombe trans., *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

52 By the late 1930s, *The Blue Book*—dictations taken by his students of his 1933–4 lectures entitled "Philosophy" and "Philosophy for Mathematicians"—considered an early prototype for subsequent presentation of Wittgenstein's "later philosophy"—had circulated among the Oxford philosophy faculty with whom Ryle spent his formative philosophical years, and joined in 1945. For comments on his relationship with Wittgenstein see Gilbert Ryle, "Autobiographical" in *Ryle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 5 and 11; see also Ray Monk's commentary on their time together in *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1990), pp. 275, 336–337 and 436.

53 Ryle, "Autobiographical," p. 11.

54 Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, p. 13. For Ryle's scholarly engagement with Wittgenstein's work, see his "Ludwig Wittgenstein," *Analysis* Vol. XII, 1951 and "Review of Ludwig Wittgenstein: Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics," in *Scientific American* Vol. CXVII (1957). Both are reprinted in Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 1971).

55 Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," (1982) in *T&N*, pp. 96–97. Frei cites Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: religious development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968) as an example of the analysis he here describes (p. 96, ftn. 4).

56 Geertz originally borrowed this term from Gilbert Ryle, "The Thinking of Thoughts: What is *le Penseur* doing?" Frei also cites this essay at various points.

57 Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, pp. 13–14; cf. "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?" (1983) in *T&N*, pp. 117–151 (esp. 146–148).

58 Clifford Geertz, "Preface" to *Available Light: Anthropological Reflection on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. xi–xii (my emphasis).

59 Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, p. 13; Cf. "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," pp. 146–147.

60 Geertz explicitly invokes Ryle and Auerbach at various points in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), especially in the essays "Thick Description," and "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind," pp. 55–83 (esp. 55–61). For insight into the full extent of Auerbach's influence on Geertz's idea of thick description, see Steven Greenblatt, "The Touch of the Real," in Sherry Ortner (ed), *The Fate of Culture: Geertz and Beyond* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

61 Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," in *T&N*, pp. 140–141.

62 This way of characterizing Frei's development was first suggested to me by George Hunsinger.

63 Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, p. 5; Cf. "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," in *T&N*, pp. 144–145.

64 Frei identified two additional "informal rules" in virtue of which the literal reading exerted itself as plain throughout the Christian tradition. Second, Christian reading was to deny neither the unity of the Old and New Testaments, nor the centrality of the gospels' accounts of Jesus for organizing that unity. And third, any readings that did not contradict the first two guidelines were to be presumed permissible. Two examples of the latter that Frei pinpointed were historical-critical and literary readings. Frei found particularly useful Brevard Childs' exploration of the various ways that the *sensus literalis* had been articulated in light of these minimal points of agreement. See Brevard Childs, "The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolph Smend (eds), *Beitrage zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift fur Walther Zimmerli zum 70 Geburtstag* (Gottingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 80–95.

65 Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," in *T&N*, p. 143.

66 Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal'," (1985) in *T&N*, pp. 208–209.

67 Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," (1982) in *T&N*, pp. 110 and 111; Cf. Frei, *Identity*, Chapter 10.

68 Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," (1982) in *T&N*, pp. 110 and 111.

69 Thus, for instance, Frei softened the theoretical implications of his earlier uses of the terms "presence" and "narrative" without jettisoning either their informal or qualified technical uses. See Hans Frei, "Preface" to *Identity* (1974), p. 55; "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," pp. 111–112; "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," in *T&N*, pp. 142–143, 148.

70 Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," in *T&N*, pp. 140–145. Frei has in mind here his earlier use of realistic narrative, particularly in virtue of its potentially mis-ordered relation to New Criticism. However, once the more general insights are properly re-oriented by normative priority of the *sensus literalis*, their purported generality becomes negligible. I take this to be the point of the third "informal rule" in virtue of which the *sensus literalis* has asserted itself as "plain" throughout much of the Christian tradition.

71 Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, pp. 86–87. Note that, at this point in *Types of Christian Theology*, Frei goes on to discuss in detail certain of the rough rules for biblical reading and exegesis set forth by Barth in *CD, 1.2*, pp. 727–736.

72 Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," pp. 113–114. Here again Frei explicates his ideas about the constraints exerted by the biblical text throughout Christian traditions of reading in terms of *explicatio, meditatio* and *applicatio*, and again with direct reference to Barth's account of these terms in *CD, 1.2*, pp. 722–782 (esp. 722–735).

73 Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," *T&N*, pp.113–114.

74 *Ibid*.

75 *Ibid*., "This will obviously mean a humbler hermeneutics for rather low-level guidance in interpretation than we have become accustomed to." Cf. Frei, "Preface" to *Identity*, pp. 60–63.

76 Frei, "Remarks," in *T&N*, p. 33.
77 Frei borrows the term from Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 10.
78 Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative," in *T&N*, pp. 111–114.
79 Frei, *Identity*, p. 190.
80 Frei, "Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism," Lecture for the Karl Barth Society of North America, Toronto, Spring 1974, in Mike Higton (ed), *Hans W. Frei: Unpublished Pieces, Transcripts from the Yale Divinity School Archive*, p. 31.
81 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, pp. 113–118. Limitations of space prohibit my treating in this essay their salient differences on this point in detail. Suffice it to say for my present purposes that there are crucial, if subtle, distinctions to be drawn between Lindbeck and Frei on this point (among others). Hunsinger provides a helpful account of the most important differences between Frei and Lindbeck in his essay "Postliberal theology," in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 42–57. In my judgment, William Placher's discussion of the complex inter-relation of "the narrated world of the Gospels and 'our world'" suggests what a reliable expansion upon Frei's basic ideas on the matter might look like. See William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), Chapter 4 (esp. pp. 101–104). Placher points out that a crucial text for comparison is Barth's *CD 2.2*, p. 136 ff.
82 Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," in *T&N*, pp. 147–149.
83 Keep in mind that Frei's account of the *sensus literalis* highlighted its delicacy and flexibility as a norm for reading, interpretation and practice across various contexts (*Ibid.*, pp. 144–145). Cf. Brevard Childs, "The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture," pp. 80–95.
84 I presented a version of this paper to the Karl Barth Society of North America at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Philadelphia. I am grateful to all who participated in that conversation, and especially for critical feedback from Todd Cioffi, Kevin Hector, Mike Higton, George Hunsinger, Martin Kavka, Atalia Omer, Kate Sonderegger, and for helpful comments from a reviewer for *Modern Theology*.