

1

Prolegomenon to Fictionalizing Jesus

WHAT ARE JESUS NOVELS?

Jesus Novels As Historical Fiction

WHEN TRYING TO CLASSIFY Jesus novels, we find that the first locus of reference providing some delimitation for their form and content is the larger literary genre to which they primarily, but not exclusively, belong—historical fiction. A simple consideration of this genre’s title tells a great deal about the nature of the works contained under its umbrella. The fact that “fiction” rather than “history” is the noun found in the title signals that such narratives are first and foremost fiction.¹ Because a work of fiction is a “literary nonreferential narrative text,”² it is by definition not required to be externally referential to the actual world in any prescribed way.³

While such creative license might at first lead us to believe that Jesus novels can take on virtually any form and portray Jesus in almost any way imaginable, there are limits, albeit broad ones, to their depictions since Jesus novels are not just fiction but specifically *historical* fiction.

1. Cohn, *Distinction*, 162

2. *Ibid.*, 1. See also Harshaw who defines fiction as “language offering propositions which make no claim for truth values in the real world” (Harshaw, “Fictionality,” 229).

3. According to leading theorists, so long as these works are internally consistent, no more need be asked for them to be regarded as “true” or meaningful. For discussions on fiction’s distinctive nature in terms of referentiality, see Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*; Cohn, *Distinction*; or Margolin, “Reference,” 517–42.

Fictional Characters in Relation to Real-World Counterparts

The adjectival part of this genre's title restricts the content of the novels found under its wide umbrella and points to historical fiction's tendency to depict historical characters, ones that have "real-world counterparts"⁴ whether they be Shakespeare, Genghis Khan, or, in this case, Jesus of Nazareth. These historical imports function in anchoring the novel at one level to the external historical world and to other external texts that describe these persons. Therefore, to qualify as a Jesus novel, the novel's fictional Jesus must be externally referential in some way to its real-world counterpart, Jesus of Nazareth. At the very least, the character of Jesus should share the same name and a similar life story with the one who lived and died in the first-century C.E.⁵

Although such a tethering to the real world might at first appear a simple operation, a number of issues and questions immediately arise. For example, what qualifies as a "similar" life story, and precisely how similar must such a narration be to the more established and "authoritative" versions of Jesus' life? What degree of literary license is permitted in adding or subtracting to this most well known of all life stories, and who or what will arbitrate the limits of this license? Definitive answers to such questions are not easily found even though they are interesting to raise and will be explored as we progress. Suffice it to say that the parameters as to what constitutes "similarity" are highly flexible and diverse depending on the arbitrating categories established at the onset of analysis.

While the *historical* moniker of the genre provides one such arbitrating, albeit broad and subject to varying perspectives, category, it does not

4. Ronen, *Possible Worlds*, 143

5. Zeba Crook, who has also worked on classifying the Jesus novel subgenre, adds that in order for a novel to belong to this category its Jesus must be a main character. Novels, such as Par Lagerkvist's *Barabbas* and Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur*, which are primarily about another character and in which Jesus is a minor or brief character, would not qualify under this definition (Crook, "Fictionalizing Jesus").

While there is an important distinction to be made between a novel, such as Gompertz's *Jewish Brother*, which centers on Jesus and his life, and a novel, such as *Ben Hur*, in which Jesus barely appears, I believe that Crook's definition is too restrictive. It would disqualify, for example, Gerd Theissen's *The Shadow of the Galilean*, in which a Jesus character never even appears although one of the predominant aims of the novel is the construction of a fictional portrait of Jesus and the location of that person within his first-century setting. Perhaps a better qualification in determining what is and what is not a Jesus novel is not the size of the Jesus character's role but the extent to which the novel develops a Christological portrait and the impact that its fictional Jesus, seen or unseen, has on the overall plot and on other characters. While I have chosen in this monograph to limit our case studies only to novels in which Jesus is a main character, I believe that the subgenre of Jesus novels should be extended to such marginal cases.

prevent the metamorphosis of the imported historical elements even though it may limit the extent to which they are changed. Precisely because the novels are historical *fiction*, none of these historical details are ever completely safe from transformation once they have been imported into the novels' fictional worlds. With fictional Jesuses, we see a strange tension between faithful correspondence to their external counterpart and creative freedom to reconfigure that character in a variety of ways.

In addition to its real-world counterpart characters, historical fiction is also known for its creation of imaginary characters. These characters are imaginary extensions of the external historical world, but they have an existence only in the novel's fictional world. There, the real-world counterparts and imaginary characters blend together to create an internally coherent new world.⁶

In Jesus novels, we often see such a mixture taking place. Sometimes new characters are invented to narrate Jesus' life from a different point of view, such as Biff in Moore's *Lamb*, and sometimes they are created to add a new plotline, such as when Jesus falls in love with Avigail in Rice's *Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana*. Whatever their purpose or function, the ability of these imaginary characters to coexist plausibly with real-world counterparts within the new fictional world is a hallmark of historical fiction in general and is seen in Jesus novels as well.⁷

Fictional Worlds in Relation to the Actual World

Besides restraining the extent to which a fictional Jesus can differ from its historical counterpart, historical fiction also restricts the liberty of fiction in its creation of possible worlds. Because Jesus novels are *historical* fiction, they are limited to portraying the actual, physical world of the past—first-century Palestine in the case of Jesus novels. This restriction differentiates them from other fictional novels with Jesus characters, such as J. F. Girzone's *Joshua*, that transport him into the modern world or into any other world for that matter.

Yet like anything imported from the actual world into the fictional world, even the historical setting is not safe from reconfiguration. Jesus novels, such as Vidal's *Live From Golgotha*, sometimes transgress the boundaries of their first-century settings and cross into other arenas of space and time to present multiple historical worlds.⁸ As long as the narrative world

6. Harshaw, "Fictionality," 246.

7. Dolezel, "Fictional and Historical Narrative," 257.

8. *Live From Golgotha* is a paradigmatic borderline case in classifying Jesus novels.

PART I: From Jesus to Jesus Texts

that the fictional Jesus inhabits principally resembles the actual first-century one, the work may still be considered a Jesus novel.⁹

Finally, the fact that Jesus novels belong to the genre of historical fiction distinguishes them from Christ-figure novels, such as Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* or C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. These novels typically are not set in the first-century, nor do they contain a fictional Jesus. Instead, these are better classified as "global allusions" because they appropriate motifs from Jesus' life, such as his martyrdom, that are then refigured in the lives of completely different characters, such as Graham's whiskey priest or Lewis's Aslan.¹⁰

Jesus Novels As Rewrites

Besides belonging to the genre of historical fiction, Jesus novels also fall under the category of Gospel rewrites.¹¹ This additional level of external reference, this time to the canonical Gospels specifically rather than to

Arguably, it does belong outside the genre of Jesus novels, but its border crossing and portrait of Jesus are so intriguing that it is instructive to include it.

9. Of course, our knowledge of what the first-century world was "actually" like is largely dependent upon ancient texts and artifacts and is itself a textual construction. Thus, the resemblance of these modern Jesus texts to the external ancient world is in large part a question of correspondence to the very Gospel texts that they are rewriting as well as to other ancient texts and artifacts from which historians construct this idea of the "actual" ancient world that shapes our perceptions of what does and what does not constitute a faithful resemblance.

10. Ben-Porat, "Introduction," 4. While in one sense all rewrites, including Jesus novels, are global allusions to their source material, they are more than just allusions by virtue of their intentionality in evoking the original sources and the greater extent to which they import the source material.

11. The idea of Gospel rewrites is similar to the concept of the Rewritten Bible, which was introduced by Geza Vermes to describe post-biblical Jewish literature, such as Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* or the book of Jubilees (Vermes, *Scripture*, 67–126). Such works retell stories from the Bible in new ways that often include supplementation and interpretation. These fictive supplements to the biblical stories James Kugel calls "narrative expansions." Of them, he says, "A narrative expansion can consist of anything not found in the original biblical story—generally, an additional action performed by one or more of the people in the story or additional words spoken in the course of the events." They can be as small as an inserted new word or as large as entire new episodes (Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 6). The difference between Vermes' Rewritten Bible and these Jesus novels, which we are classifying as Gospel rewrites, seems to be one of quantity rather than of quality. They are in essence doing the same type of rewriting, but the novels are lengthier and more sustained in their efforts at rewriting by reproducing multiple episodes from Jesus' life rather than simply one.

ancient Palestine more generally, again limits the extent to which the novel's fictional Jesus can be reinvented.

Rewriting has become a specialty all its own within literary criticism and is popular among those interested in the intertextual nature of texts.¹² In outlining precisely what a rewrite is, Ziva Ben-Porat states that it is “a retelling of a known story in such a way that the resulting text, the rewrite, is simultaneously an original composition and a recognizable rendition, involving a critical rereading of the source.”¹³

Rewrites call attention to their intertextual nature by using the original text as the “major building blocks” of their works. Because they build on these earlier works, there is an inherent “reading pact” imbedded within the rewrite, which acts as an interpretative bond between the original and its progeny. When speaking of the “reading pact,” we are referring to a set of expectations as to what the text will contain and how it should be read that is activated once the reader becomes aware of the work's particular genre, intended audience, and any other information pertinent to its proper interpretation. This pact denotes a particular way of reading rather than simply pointing out what type of writing a text is.¹⁴ Rewrites depend on the reader's ability to actualize this reading pact encoded within the text's DNA. Once a reader has become aware of the rewrite's connection to the original texts, then those earlier texts can never be discarded as irrelevant because they constantly are being referenced during the reading of the rewrite, and knowledge of them is essential for proper comprehension and interpretation of the rewrite.¹⁵ According to Ben-Porat, “[O]nce a text is perceived as a rewrite it incites the perceiver to read it and process the new information in a particular relation to a declared or assumed source text: mapping from the new text onto the previous one entails the perception of the links as faithful/unfaithful transposition, representations or substitution, and as acceptable/unacceptable omissions, additions and changes.”¹⁶ Consequently, the actualization of this reading pact not only affects interpretation of the rewrite but also alters the reader's relationship to and understanding of the original text itself.

In the case of Jesus novels, they are considered *Gospel* rewrites because their “major building blocks” come from the canonical Gospels although

12. Intertextuality, first coined by Julia Kristeva in response to the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to the relationships between a text and any other texts that it invokes, whether by implicit allusion or explicit citation (Frow, *Genre*, 48).

13. Ben-Porat, “Saramago's *Gospel* and the poetics of prototypical rewriting,” 93.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Ben-Porat, “Introduction,” 5, 6.

16. Ben-Porat, “Saramago's *Gospel*,” 94.

PART I: From Jesus to Jesus Texts

additional pieces are also often imported from other texts. These texts may often include the non-canonical gospels, ancient historiographical works, such as those written by Philo or Josephus, and theological treatises.¹⁷ Adele Reinhartz notes in discussing “rewritten Gospels” that in order for a work to qualify as such it must tell a sequential story of Jesus’ life based on the Gospel accounts that follow their “overall order and narrative thrust” while still adding supplemental details and presenting the old story in a new and imaginative way.¹⁸ That the Jesus novels are usually rewrites of not just one Gospel but of all four does complicate matters because it means that the reader must constantly be aware of these different texts when analyzing a Gospel rewrite. The four Jesus novels that we will examine as case studies are all clear examples of Gospel rewrites and draw upon material from multiple canonical Gospels.

Readers are first alerted to a novel’s status as a Gospel rewrite, and thus to its reading pact that demands engagement with the novel’s Gospel sources, by the specific Gospel material appropriated by a novel. There are also other internal cues, such as when a novel refers to itself as a gospel, when a narrator refers to himself or herself as an evangelist, or when the narrator refers to other accounts of Jesus’ life, that signal to the reader that the novel is a Gospel rewrite.¹⁹ In addition, paratextual cues, such as titles and information given on dust jackets and introductions, are also helpful in framing the narrative as a Gospel rewrite. For example, the titles *Testament*, *The Gospel according to the Son*, and *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* all connect the novels with the canonical Gospels and imply that they should be read as other valid versions of Jesus’ life.²⁰

The varied ways in which each novel engages with the Gospel source material is one of the major areas of interest to this study. Like everything else imported into the fictional world of a Jesus novel, the Gospel material itself is not safe from being transformed. While some rewritings can be mimetic in form and in content, they can also be subversive in their stance

17. Fortney’s *The Thomas Jesus* raises an interesting challenge to this rule because its fictional Jesus is more intentionally based on *The Gospel of Thomas*’ picture of Jesus rather than on the canonical Gospel Jesus. Yet even this novel is dependent upon the canonical Gospels, particularly for narrative material, which is lacking from the Thomasine sayings gospel, and so also functions as a Gospel rewrite.

18. In her 2009 article, Reinhartz examines the rewriting of the Passion narratives and the characterization of Caiaphas in Sayers’ *The Man Born to Be King* and in Asch’s *The Nazarene* (Reinhartz, “Rewritten Gospel,” 177).

19. Examples of all three of these types of cues can be seen in Saramago’s *Gospel*, 192, 200, 204.

20. Ben-Porat, “Saramago’s *Gospel*,” 94.

toward the Gospels.²¹ In fact, subversion or even inversion, particularly of characters' dispositions or roles, are some of the most common practices of rewrites.²² Such transformations can be achieved not only by calling into question particular events or sayings recorded in the Gospels but also by challenging more essential elements of their narratives, such as their pre-supposed worldview or their Christological portrayals. The importation of additional characters and events creates further possibilities of subversion by shifting interpersonal dynamics and displaying new facets of the historical characters. How faithful or divergent the rewrite is to its Gospel sources, however, obviously varies with each novel and often from scene to scene within the novel itself.²³ Because the reading pact imbedded within the Jesus novels identifies them as Gospel rewrites, readers are compelled to view these works in light of their relationships with the Gospels and to judge how these novels function as competing or complementing narratives to their sources. This topic is one to which we will return below in section three.

JESUS AND JESUS PORTRAITS

Having established that Jesus novels are primarily works of historical fiction that at least minimally refer to Jesus of Nazareth and to the canonical Gospels, it is important for us to take a step back to examine this person and these sources which the novels rewrite. To do this will involve establishing terminology for the person of Jesus and for his literary portrayals. This endeavor has been aided considerably by Raymond Brown's discussion of different types of Jesus portraits, which he labels the actual Jesus, the historical Jesus, and the Gospel Jesus.²⁴ A preliminary examination of these "Jesuses" will be helpful since the fictional Jesuses that inhabit these novels correspond to some, if not all, of these portraits.

Actual Jesus

When speaking of the "actual Jesus," Brown refers to the person who lived in Galilee and died in Jerusalem almost two thousand years ago. While many would call this person the historical Jesus, Brown reserves that term for the historiographical portraits that scholars create. He most likely draws this

21. Ben-Porat, "Introduction," 5.

22. Ben-Porat, "Saramago's *Gospel*," 95.

23. Ben-Porat, "Introduction," 6.

24. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 105–6.

PART I: From Jesus to Jesus Texts

distinction in order to avoid the confusion between the representation and its referent that often arises with the label “historical Jesus” and with the word “history” in general.²⁵

If one were able to create a portrait of the actual Jesus, Brown says that it would portray his life from birth until death. It would include information such as what he looked like, what jokes he laughed at, whether he fell in love, and so on. In short, such a description would include all of the details of interest found in a modern biography. Unfortunately, much of this information has been lost in the recesses of antiquity and is unrecoverable except through imagination. Yet it is precisely “through imagination” where the Jesus novels come in. In their fictional portrayals, the novels answer many of the questions about the actual Jesus that are left unanswered in the Gospel portraits.

Historical Jesus

Moving from the actual person of Jesus to his portrayals, we come to “the historical Jesus.” The historical Jesus refers to portraits that are also aimed at recovering and presenting the details of Jesus’ actual life. Although the common expectation is that these scholarly reconstructions present Jesus *as he actually was*,²⁶ their ability to do so is limited by the amount of data

25. Paul Tillich once noted that a great deal of semantic confusion surrounds the term “historical Jesus” because it has been used for both the actual person who lived in first-century Palestine and for the narrative reconstructions of that person based on the results of historical research and written by historians. As Tillich wisely observed, no honest discussion can take place without first distinguishing between these two meanings (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 123).

In this monograph, I have chosen to use the term “actual Jesus” when referring to the person who lived in first-century Palestine and “historical Jesus” when referring to the writings of historians about that person. Preserving this distinction is also important for our discussion not only because it helps to avoid confusion but also because it protects us from collapsing the two meanings together and thus falsely assuming that any writing can ever be the same as the people or events about which it speaks. It is a truism that bears repeating—a representation can never be the same as the thing being represented, nor can it be exchanged with its referent (Ankersmit, “Historical Representation,” 218; cf. A.C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 120–121).

26. Ranke first popularized the notion that the aim of historiography was to present *history as it actually was* (Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*). This conception of not only historiography but also of many of the other “realist” genres is misleading, to say the least (Colie, *The Resources of Kind*, 5; see also Frow, *Genre*, 19). None of their presentations are ever simply and only the subject itself. All inherently involve interpretation in their understanding and reconstructions of actuality. There is no such thing as a genre devoid of subjective perspective and capable of presenting anything merely and only as it actually is or was.

provided by the ancient sources. Also, just as with any Jesus portrait, their depiction is inevitably influenced by the interpretation given to the available source material and by the methodology used in handling it.

When we observe the way in which historical Jesus scholars typically approach the canonical material, we notice that it differs from the method used by other Jesus portrait painters, especially from those who wish to make a harmonized Gospel portrait of Jesus. Whereas harmonizers try to preserve as much canonical material as possible and to unify the evangelists' voices into one seamless narrative, historians usually go behind the Gospels, disassembling their portraits in order to draw out fragments of a historical reality buried beneath the evangelists' theologically redacted layers.²⁷ Those specializing in this field vary in their opinions on the historicity of the Gospels, with some pronouncing that little of the canonical material can be traced back to Jesus himself and others expressing more confidence in them. As with anything that has been taken apart, the portraits of Jesus reassembled by historical scholars may not be put back together in the same "Gospel" form and typically do not use all of the Gospel pieces, even pieces about whose historicity they are more confident.²⁸

Also, the sum of these reassembled historical Jesuses is often more than the individual parts taken from the original sources, and yet the role that interpretation plays in these portraits is not always fully acknowledged.²⁹ We can see through a quick perusal of the gallery of historical Jesus portraits just how varied their interpretations of what Jesus was *actually* like can be. The works hanging there include portraits as diverse as S. G. F. Brandon's "Jesus the political revolutionary" (1968), Morton Smith's "Jesus the magician" (1978), Géza Vermès' "Jesus the Galilean charismatic" (1981, 1984),

27. In doing this, modern scholars resemble Marcion, who deleted major bits of the Gospels, more than Tatian, who preferred to retain and harmonize all the pieces from the Gospels. Marcion, who accepted only a revised version of Luke's Gospel, rejected the other Gospels as Judaizing Gospels. Hengel compares what Marcion did to modern critics who, in trying to regain the original words of Jesus, strip away whatever they see as redactional layers in order to leave only the actual Jesus sans theological interpretations (Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 32–33).

28. In using a mathematical analogy to explain historical Jesus research, Allison comments, "One can draw any number of curves through a finite set of points to create a thousand different pictures. . . . It is always possible to explain one set of facts with more than one story" (Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 37).

29. Rae criticizes the widespread belief that the actual Jesus can be accessed directly without the "contamination" of interpretation. He censures both those who champion a literal reading of the Bible as a path providing direct access to him and those who believe that the actual Jesus is accessible to any objective observer who uncovers the "neutral" data by stripping back the interpretive layers of the Gospels (Rae, *History and Hermeneutics*, 95).

PART I: From Jesus to Jesus Texts

Bruce Chilton's "Jesus the Galilean rabbi" (1984, 2000), Harvey Falk's "Jesus the Hillelite or proto-Pharisee" or his "Jesus the Essene" (1985), Marcus Borg's "Jesus the spiritual mystic, wisdom teacher, and founder of a revitalization movement" (1987, 1994), or John Dominic Crossan's "Jesus the Galilean Cynic peasant" (1991, 1994).³⁰ In a separate wing of the gallery, we might peruse the similar "third quest" portraits including such works as E.P. Sanders' "Jesus the eschatological prophet of restoration" (1985, 1993), N.T. Wright's "Jesus the Jewish prophet and forerunner of Christian orthodoxy" (1993, 1996), and Dale C. Allison's "Jesus the millenarian prophet" (1998).

Jesus novelists acquainted with historical Jesus scholarship sometimes intentionally model their fictional creations on different historical Jesuses, and often their approach to the Gospel sources mirrors that of the scholars whose Jesuses they emulate. For instance, with Anne Rice's *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, we see a novel influenced by "third quest" historical Jesus scholarship that expresses more confidence in the historicity of the Gospels and that paints a very Jewish Jesus. In contrast, Steven Fortney's *The Thomas Jesus* provides an example of a fictional Jesus based on the work of the Jesus Seminar that elevates the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas* as a primary source for uncovering the actual Jesus. By basing their Jesus characters on historical Jesus scholarship, the novelists bolster the historicity of their works and the impression that their fictional Jesuses may represent the actual Jesus.

The Gospel Jesus

The final type of Jesus portrait that Brown discusses is that of the Gospel Jesus. As historical Jesus scholars rightly point out, the Gospel portraits are written from theological perspectives, which make it difficult to discern which parts accurately portray the actual Jesus and which are reflections of the evangelists' faith projected onto that person.

These portraits may seem inadequate and even unhistorical when approached with the assumptions of modern historiography, but that is because they belong to the world of ancient historiography and should be judged according to those standards and not modern ones. Recent genre work on the canonical Gospels has located them within the realm of Greco-Roman

30. Several of these "portrait titles," which are summaries of their works and not official titles, are from Daniel J. Harrington's presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association cited by Crossan (Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, xxvii–xxviii).

biography or βίος,³¹ which David Aune describes as “a specific genre of Greco-Roman historical literature with broad generic features.”³²

Since the chief aim of these ancient biographies was to communicate the essence of a great person and why his or her life was noteworthy rather than to merely detail the facts of that person’s life, some events were stressed while others were left unrecorded. Ancient biographies also were not limited to only those events that actually took place, and even fictional elements could be a part of their descriptive portraits. Unlike modern biographies, which require historical veracity, ancient biographies were regarded as truthful representations so long as they were faithful to the person’s character by picturing who that person “really” was. Plausibility rather than authenticity was the chief means of distinguishing truth from falsehood in their portrayals.³³

In many ways, the Gospel portraits are like icons and are even referred to as such in early Byzantine theology.³⁴ Unlike photographs, which mimetically reproduce their referents with no discrimination to details, icons highlight significant details and suppress those that are less important.³⁵ They claim to represent what it is most essential about a person and thus are interpretive objects drawing the beholder’s gaze to focus on what that person is “really” like. Unlike “realist” genres, iconic imagery draws a distinction between the real and the actual and asserts that reality is more than that which can be empirically observed and reproduced in an imitative fashion.³⁶ In fact, representing that which is “really real” may require art

31. Burrige, *Four Gospels*, 6–8; Thanks to Justin Smith for his assistance in understanding the issues surrounding genre classification of the Gospels. For further discussions on this matter, see also the following works: Burrige, *What are the Gospels?*; Aune, “Greco-Roman Biography”; Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*; Talbert, “Once Again: Gospel Genre,” 43; and Talbert, “The Gospel and the Gospels,” 33.

32. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, 29. Richard Bauckham agrees and sees biography as a type of historiography (Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 220, 472–87).

33. Aune, ed. *New Testament*, 64–65.

34. Lepakhin cites Maximus the Confessor from the seventh century as the earliest extant example of someone referring to the Gospels as iconic (Lepakhin, “Text and Icon,” 20).

35. Green has a similar discussion comparing images and pictures of God (Green, *Imagining God*, 93–94).

36. Following the ideas of Jüngel (Webster, ed. *Eberhard Jüngel: Theological Essays*, 95–123), Trevor Hart argues for a distinction between actuality and reality rather than an uncritical equation of the two. He says that the future eschatological dimension may very well turn out to be more real than what can be empirically observed in the present (Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth*, 56–57).

PART I: From Jesus to Jesus Texts

that is inherently non-realistic in form, and yet non-realistic should never be equated with completely fictional. Eastern iconic art understands these distinctions and makes a different kind of truth claim than Western “realist” forms of art by asserting that reality can be portrayed, perhaps even better, through non-realistic representations.

When we compare the Gospels to icons, we see that the Gospels also attempt to bring their audiences in contact with different aspects of what the evangelists consider to be the essential features of Jesus’ character. Like icons, they train the beholders to see their subject through theological eyes and thus with a clearer gaze on reality.³⁷ Viewers behold ontological aspects of the real personhood of Jesus through representations that are not entirely actual but are nonetheless real and true, perhaps in even deeper ways.³⁸

Also like icons, the Gospels present us with multiple images of Jesus that though different in many aspects are still united on the features that are most representative of Jesus’ person. This multiplicity of images helps to prevent viewers from idolatrously equating one image with the person as if it could fully represent or replace that which it signifies. Thus, just as with historical Jesuses, we can speak of many different Gospel Jesuses: the “Matthean Jesus,” the “Markan Jesus,” the “Lukan Jesus,” and the “Johannine Jesus.”³⁹ To these we could add the noncanonical variety, such as the “Thomasine Jesus” or the “Peterine Jesus.” When Brown uses the term “Gospel Jesus,” he is simply referring to a portrait created by one of the evangelists.

Artists and theologians, however, rarely limit themselves to simply one of the evangelists’ portraits when constructing an image of Jesus. In fact, most draw at least a few pieces from each of the four portraits and then reassemble them, often at an unconscious level, to form one new harmonized

37. Paul Tillich likens the Gospels to “expressionist” portraits. He says, “In this approach a painter would try to enter into the deepest levels of the person with whom he deals. And he could do so only by a profound participation in the reality and the meaning of his subject matter. Only then could he paint this person in such a way that his surface traits are neither reproduced as in photography (or naturalistically imitated) nor idealised according to the painter’s ideal of beauty but are used to express what the painter has experienced through his participation in the being of his subject. This third way is meant when we use the term ‘real picture’ with reference to the Gospel records of Jesus as the Christ” (*Systematic Theology*, 133).

38. Likewise, Luke Timothy Johnson has observed that the Jesus whom the Gospels present is real in more senses than can be empirically observed, and therefore, the Gospels are truthful even though the truth that they portray goes beyond actuality (*Real Jesus*, 141–42).

39. Throughout, I will refer to the Gospel authors as “Matthew,” “Mark,” “Luke,” and “John” simply as a shorthand way of referring to the implied authors. This usage does not imply that I am assuming apostolic authorship for these works. The issue of authorship itself is not directly relevant to my work and thus is not addressed.

mosaic of the Gospel Jesus. Of course, each person's harmonized picture of the Gospel Jesus will be different, but so long as the tiles used in constructing that mosaic image are taken from the Gospels and used in a manner complementary to that of the Gospels when repositioned, that image can qualify as a faithful reworking of the Gospel Jesus. When we refer to the idea of the "Gospel Jesus" in this monograph, we are speaking of such a harmonized mosaic, and it is against such a composite portrait that we will compare the fictional Jesuses in each of the novels.

My View of Jesus

In the interest of full disclosure, it is perhaps beneficial to pause and say a word about my own presuppositions regarding the person and portraits of Jesus because my views undoubtedly shape and color much of what follows no matter how much I may strive for objectivity. As a committed member of a Christian faith community, I carry my own set of subjective beliefs that no doubt incline me to have an affinity toward more orthodox views and portraits of Jesus. While I recognize the role of theological interpretation in shaping the canonical Gospels and do not believe that these ancient biographies are simply direct representations of the actual Jesus, I am more likely to join with the proto-orthodox Christian community rather than to contradict it, unless there is compelling evidence to do so, in affirming the Gospel portrayals as faithful and instructive for the Christian faith. Much as Johnson argues, I believe the Jesus encountered in the Gospels to be the "real Jesus" in the sense that his being and person are accurately captured there perhaps precisely because the Gospels do go beyond his earthly actuality and point towards his post-resurrection existence and enthronement.⁴⁰ While I agree with historical Jesus scholarship that the theologizing that takes place in the Gospels makes it more difficult to recover the actual Jesus, as a person of faith, I believe that their theologizing is more positive than problematic precisely because it paints a much richer portrait of whom, by faith, I believe Jesus to be.

40. As Johnson argues, the Gospels reveal this real Jesus—the Jesus who was resurrected, who is the Son of God, and who continues to live seated at the right hand of God (Acts 2:34). Their descriptions surpass the boundaries of modern historiographical inquiry and are told from the point of view of resurrection faith. "[T]he *real Jesus* for Christian faith," according to Johnson, "is not simply a figure of the past but very much and above all a figure of the present, a figure, indeed, who defines believers' present by his presence" (Johnson, *Real Jesus*, 141–42).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GOSPEL JESUS AND FICTIONAL JESUSES, BETWEEN THE GOSPELS AND THE GOSPEL REWRITES

The Fourfold Gospel Boundary

When these novels are examined from a Christian perspective, we find that boundaries are already to some extent established for imaging Jesus. While the plurality of the canonical Gospels may have functioned, at least implicitly, as a stimulus to the production of new Jesus images, this plurality also set limits for the appropriate re-imaging of Jesus. As Richard Burridge explains, “By selecting only four, they [the proto-orthodox Christian community] mapped out the ball park where those who wish to remain in the tradition must play.”⁴¹ According to these “rules of play,” not all portraits are equally valid, and there are some guidelines by which artists must abide in order for their works to be considered as acceptable orthodox images.

Anyone who has followed the media and witnessed the publicity surrounding the National Geographic’s unveiling of the lost *Gospel of Judas* or the Jesus Seminar’s inclusion of the *Gospel of Thomas* as the “fifth gospel” offering authentic sayings of the actual Jesus is at least aware that there are more gospels than just the four canonical ones.⁴² Indeed, the production of gospels appears to have been a major enterprise during late antiquity.⁴³ Luke refers to the fact that “many” had written accounts of Jesus’ life prior to the writing of his Gospel (1:1). A few of these gospels, although probably not most, may have been roughly contemporary with the canonical Gospels but probably not predecessors of them.⁴⁴ So if there were other gospels available, why were only four adopted by the church?⁴⁵

Origen gives an answer to that question when he declares that within the four Gospels the same Lord is being preached (Origen. *Comm. On John*,

41. Burridge, *Four Gospels* 177.

42. Funk and Hoover, *Five Gospels*.

43. Aune, ed. *New Testament*, 68. Graham Stanton has counted about thirty Christian writings that designate themselves as “gospels” and were written prior to 600 C.E. (Stanton, *Gospels*, 122).

44. Bauckham, “The Study of Gospel Traditions,” 370–71; cf. Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 88. Crossan is one example of someone who would date some of the non-canonical gospels (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas) or at least some of the earlier sources within those gospels (e.g., the “Cross Gospel” embedded within the Gospel of Peter) prior to the canonical Gospels (Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 427–29).

45. Stanton says that we have no manuscript evidence that there was ever acceptance of a “fifth” gospel alongside the NT four within mainstream Christianity (Stanton, *Jesus*, 87; cf. Elliott, “Manuscripts, the Codex and the Canon,” 87).

5.4 [ANF 9:348]). Similarly, Irenaeus writes that it is between the four Gospel pillars that “Christ Jesus is seated” (*Against Heresies* III.11.8–9 [ANF 1:429]).⁴⁶ Since gospels are in essence “Christology in narrative form,”⁴⁷ each one, canonical or non-canonical, aims at presenting a Jesus consistent with its author’s or community’s theological understanding of him. According to the early church’s perspective, the “real Jesus” could be found in the four canonical Gospels but not in those other gospels.⁴⁸ Therefore, the four Gospels became the canon, the “ruler” against which any other Jesus images should be measured.⁴⁹ In order for any of those images to remain within the orthodox camp, their depictions of Jesus needed to fall somewhere between the fourfold boundaries established by the Gospels.

Of course, simply because the Gospels provide a fourfold boundary for orthodox images of Jesus does not mean that they are the only sources from which material can be drawn when constructing a new portrait. As noted above, Jesus novels import material from a variety of places. Many orthodox rewrites freely appropriate material from non-canonical gospels, such as names of unnamed characters in Gospels and additional events. It is not necessarily the sources being used that determine a Jesus novel’s relationship to its Gospel sources and the boundaries they have established. Rather, it is the way in which those sources are treated and transformed upon entry into the novel’s fictional world that determines whether or not a novel is a faithful rewrite remaining within the fourfold fence.

46. Likewise, Burridge suggests, “Somewhere *in between* the four boundaries, running around on the field of play but refusing to be tied down, is the historical Jesus whose character stimulated it all in the first place” (*Four Gospels*, 177).

47. *Ibid.*, 8.

48. Origen comments, “The Church possesses four Gospels, heresy a great many. . . . Many have taken in hand to write, but only four Gospels are recognized” (*Homilies on Luke* 1:5–6). Irenaeus in discussing the canonical Gospels in relation to the non-canonical gospels has this to say: “[T]hese Gospels alone are true and reliable, and admit neither an increase nor diminution of the aforesaid number.” He also warns that “all who destroy the form of the Gospel are vain, unlearned, and also audacious; those, [I mean,] who represent the aspects of the Gospel as being either more in number than as aforesaid, or, on the other hand, fewer. The former class [do so], that they may seem to have discovered more than is of the truth; the latter, that they may set the dispensations of God aside” (*Against Heresies* III.11.9 [ANF 1:429]).

49. In a similar manner, Green argues, “God is rendered authoritatively for the Christian imagination in scriptural narrative, [sic] visual images can be judged according to their power to interpret scripture. By this test, even the portrayal of God the Father by Michelangelo has its place in the exegesis of Gen. 1:26–27” (*Imagining God*, 95).

Rewriting the Gospels and Responding to a Gospel Jesus Mosaic

In writing against Valentinian Gnosticism, Irenaeus once described the Gnostic use of Scripture with the analogy of a beautiful jewel-encrusted mosaic of a king. He compared the Gnostics with men who came along and removed the gems from their original positions in that mosaic and rearranged them to form a new picture, one of a dog or a fox, rather than the original image of a king. They then declared their new patterns to be the true ones, and those who had never seen royalty before mistook the picture of an animal for that of a king.⁵⁰

Irenaeus' analogy is also reminiscent of what scholars and artists have done for centuries with the Gospels as they have used them as a mine from which to extract and then reassemble Gospel bits and pieces into new Jesus images. As mentioned earlier, each person begins with some concept of what the Gospel Jesus looks like, and such an idea is usually a mosaic composition drawn from parts of all the Gospels. Then each person responds to that mental image in various ways but typically by becoming either a mosaic mover, one who, like the Gnostics, rearranges the Gospel pieces to form a new pattern, or a gap-filler, one who leaves the Gospel Jesus mosaic in place and works within the spaces between its pieces. This process certainly appears to be at work in Jesus novels as well. Their authors typically function as mosaic movers or gap-fillers depending on the way that they appropriate the Gospels, and their rewrites ultimately relate to these sources in either broadly competing or complementing ways.

Mosaic Movers and Competing Images of Jesus

In glancing back across the centuries at various attempts to rewrite the Gospels, we see that some of the very first “mosaic movers” and “gap-fillers” are the authors of non-canonical gospels. The terms “supplanting” and “supplementing” are often used in speaking of the relationship of these works to the canonical Gospels. For example, in the introduction to Hennecke's *New Testament Apocrypha*, the rationale for considering a work “apocryphal” was not just that it failed to make its way into the canon but also that it either “intended to take the place of the four Gospels of the canon . . . or to stand as enlargement of them side by side with them . . . aimed at supplementing the deficient information which the NT communicates.”⁵¹ Similarly,

50. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.8.1 (ANF 1:326).

51. Schneemelcher, “General Introduction,” 28. Likewise, Cullman says, “In the post-apostolic age one of the purposes behind these endeavours was to supplant other Gospels” (*Early Church*, 47).

Bruce Metzger divides the apocryphal gospels into two broad categories: those that intended to supplant and those that intended to supplement the four canonical Gospels.⁵² We will address the concept of “supplementing” presently, but for the moment, let us focus on how some modern rewrites may or may not share similar “supplanting” motivations with their ancient predecessors.

Unlike their non-canonical forefathers, many modern rewrites do not necessarily aim to supplant the authority of the canonical Gospels. Like them though, these rewrites often offer images of Jesus that intentionally compete with those of the Gospel Jesus. Because the motivation of modern attempts slightly differs from that of ancient ones, I prefer to use the term “competing” in order to describe not only the intention behind these novels but also the way in which their fictional Jesuses function in relation to the Gospel Jesus once the reading pact between these rewrites and their Gospel sources has been activated.

Like many of their non-canonical predecessors and like many historical Jesus portraits, competing rewrites are not content to leave the structures of the Gospel portraits in place, so they rearrange and remove many of the original pieces and produce an innovative format for their new portraits. Often, these novels intentionally seek to be controversial and provocative when compared to the original Gospel images. Whether one believes that such competing intentions are positive or negative, it can generally be agreed upon that one positive aspect of competing rewrites is that they can be successful as literary works, often unlike their more orthodox cousins, because they are not as constrained by the original pictures but are freed from the Gospel boundaries to be more creative.

While the purposes behind many of the competing rewrites vary, one of them is to challenge the historicity of the canonical Gospels. As Ben-Porat explains, “Rewriters of history assume—and often claim—that their versions are better, more representative of historical truth, than previous attempts to present the same facts.”⁵³ In undermining the historical claims of the Gospels, competing rewrites are sometimes quick to dismiss the miracles that are a part of the Gospel worldview. Instead, they present alternative views of history that eliminate supernatural interventions. For example, Jim Crace’s *Quarantine* has Jesus die thirty days into his forty-day fast; Ricci’s *Testament* explains how Jesus’ reputation as a healer was exaggerated by a rumor mill spinning greater and greater fabrications of the actual events; Lawrence’s *The Man Who Died* presents the popular notion that Jesus never

52. Metzger, *Canon*, 166.

53. Ben-Porat, “Introduction,” 2.

PART I: From Jesus to Jesus Texts

died but simply regained consciousness in the tomb after passing out on the cross; and Vidal's *Live From Golgotha* promulgates the mistaken identity theory of Judas being crucified in Jesus' place.

At other times, competing novels willingly allow the miraculous into their narrative worlds and challenge the Gospels not on a historical front but on a theological one. For example, many offer extremely low Christological portraits that are not very complementary to the Gospel Jesus. In Mailer's *The Gospel according to the Son*, in Saramago's *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, and in Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation*, Jesus is not simply one who struggles with sin but is sinful himself. Other times, it is Jesus' paternity that is suspect; for example, in Ricci's *Testament* Jesus is the bastard son of Mary and a Roman soldier. Sometimes, it is Jesus' intelligence or his sanity that is in doubt, as in Fortney's *The Thomas Jesus* in which Jesus is just a wee bit crazy or in Crace's *Quarantine* in which he is a naïve and slow-witted simpleton.

As we examine our two case studies of competing rewrites, we will explore some of the methods used in them to undermine either the historicity or the theology of the Gospels, and we shall also examine the competing narratives that they offer. In sum, we will attempt to discern just how complementing or competing their fictional Jesuses are in comparison with the Gospel Jesus.

Gap Fillers and Complementing Images of Jesus

The ancient works that are often deemed "supplementing" have been called so because their aim appears to be not one of replacing the Gospels but of adding to them by inventing extra-canonical episodes for Jesus' life. When scholars who study the non-canonical collection speak of supplementing gospels, they are often referring to the infancy gospels, such as the *Proto-evangelium of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.⁵⁴

As with the term "supplanting," the moniker "supplementing" is not a perfect fit when extending the terminology to include Jesus novels precisely because all Gospel rewrites supplement their sources with imaginative inventions regardless of their stance toward the historicity or theology of those sources. Instead, a better term to distinguish the intent of the more orthodox rewrites is "complementing" because their narratives usually intend to complement the Gospels rather than to compete with them.

Although both competing and complementing rewrites supplement their Gospel sources, the way they go about doing so often differs. Unlike

54. E.g., Cullmann, "Infancy Gospels," 391–92; Cameron, *Christianity*, 90, 98; Evans, "Images of Christ," 60–61.

competing narratives, complementing ones do not set about dismantling the Gospel Jesus mosaic. Because they wish to create orthodox images of Jesus, they strive to stay within the fourfold Gospel boundaries and to work with an intact Gospel Jesus mosaic. Like any mosaic, this one also has many gaps between its pieces, and so orthodox artists usually create within these spaces. There, they add additional jewels that are similar in color, texture, and shape to the original pieces and that hopefully will make the mosaic sparkle a bit brighter and look even fuller.

We can see this gap filling first taking place within some of the non-canonical infancy narratives. Since Matthew and Luke alone of the four canonical Gospels tell anything about Jesus' earlier years, a huge lacuna exists in the Gospel mosaic. To have so much silence surrounding the majority of Jesus' earthly life was not at all agreeable to many of the early Christians.⁵⁵ Because it is only natural that whenever "biographical literature shows gaps, legend generally springs up,"⁵⁶ it is not surprising that new infancy gospels arose to fill in those gaps. Motivated partly by curiosity about those years,⁵⁷ orthodox rewriters, such as the author of the *Protoevangelium of James*, began with the Matthean and Lukan narratives about Jesus' childhood and then filled them in with background stories and further details.⁵⁸

We find an additional motivation for the creation of complementing literature in Tertullian's brief reference to the author of the non-canonical *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, who decided to fill in the gaps not of Jesus' life but of Paul's. When asked why he composed the work, the writer said that he composed it out of love for the apostle Paul (Tertullian, *De baptismo* 17 [ANF 3:677]).⁵⁹

Much like their non-canonical predecessors, many Jesus novelists appear to be motivated out of a curiosity stimulated by the gaps in Jesus' life and a desire to answer imaginatively the questions left unanswered in the Gospels. Also, as we shall see, particularly in the case of Anne Rice, Jesus novelists often compose out of a devotional desire to draw closer to the one they love by writing about him.

55. Cameron, *Christianity*, 98, 113–15.

56. Cullmann, "Infancy Gospels," 364.

57. Metzger, *Canon*, 166–67; cf. Schneemelcher, "General Introduction," 62; Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels*, 64; Telford, "The New Testament in Fiction," 363. Raymond Brown even argues that this motivation could be at work both in the non-canonical and in the canonical infancy narratives. In both, we may be seeing the work of active Christian imaginations trying to explain Jesus' origination (*The Birth of the Messiah*, 33n21).

58. Schneemelcher, "Gospels," 83–84.

59. I am thankful to Aaron Kuecker for first pointing me to this reference.

PART I: From Jesus to Jesus Texts

Their aim is not to present a different person in the guise of Jesus' name but to re-present the Gospel Jesus to modern audiences through a different medium than the Gospels themselves. Often their hope is that these rewritten versions will reawaken the wonder of Jesus' story that may have been obscured by familiarity with the Gospels or that may have been missed because of the unfamiliar language and style of the first-century writers.⁶⁰ Just as words can lose their potency through familiarity, so too the Gospels can be domesticated and the radical challenge of their message dulled. The reinvestment of freshness and vigor to those Gospel stories and the reintroduction of Jesus to a modern audience are partial motivators for some complementing rewrites.⁶¹ We can see such motivation in Rice's preface to the paperback edition of her *Out of Egypt*: "As Christians, I feel most of us in the creative community must seek to be more than scribes . . . I suggest now that we must seize the revolutionary media of our age in the way that those earlier Christians and Catholics seized the printed book. We must truly use the realistic novel, the television drama, and the motion picture to tell the Christian story anew. It is our obligation to tell that story over and over and to use the best means that we have."⁶² Retelling Jesus' story with historical realism but using modern language can revive a sense of awe and challenge those whose hearing and eyes have become dull to the Gospels through familiarity.⁶³

Finally, a further aim of such complementing projects is an educational one of sending their audiences back to the original Gospels themselves. Dorothy Sayers suggests as much when she says that she hopes that the hearing of her cycle of plays on the life of Jesus would cause Bibles to be dusted off.⁶⁴ Likewise, in the preface to his Jesus novel based upon Franco Zeffirelli's film *Jesus of Nazareth*, William Barclay writes that his wish for both the novel and

60. Welch, "Foreword," 11, 13. A listener responding to Sayers's play-cycle, *The Man Born to be King*, wrote, "While in language they have been modern, their Gospel has been the eternal Gospel unchanged in substance, though expressed in a manner which would make it more intelligible to the great multitude who never read their New Testament" (14).

61. Sayers certainly lists these as motivations for her play-cycle on the life of Jesus (Sayers, "Introduction," *The Man Born to Be King*, 23).

62. Anne Rice, "Note to the Paperback Edition," *Christ the Lord*, 349–50.

63. Sayers, "Introduction," 23.

64. Welch, "Foreword," 14. Similarly, Barclay argues, "It may well be that there are some who think it is an irreverence to make the life of Jesus into a film, but there are fewer and fewer people who read and more and more who learn by looking at pictures. I therefore regard the writing of this book as an opportunity to be seized" (Barclay, "Introduction," *Jesus of Nazareth*, 7).

the film is that they will inspire their audiences to return to the Gospels and to reread them with a “new intelligence and a new vividness.”⁶⁵

In this monograph, we will examine two complementing works that endeavour to work within the Gospel boundaries without rearranging their pieces too much. While analysing this complementary technique of gap filling as seen in these two case studies, we will also attempt to gauge just how complementary their fictional Jesuses are to the Gospel Jesus.

A HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE: FROM REWRITING TO REREADING

Up until this point, we have mainly been concerned with how novelists interpret the Gospels and respond to images of the Gospel Jesus in their Gospel rewrites. This topic will continue to be the focus of the first half of this monograph as we explore four different Jesus novels and analyze how each one functions as a complementing or competing rewrite. No less important, however, is the way in which readers respond to these rewrites and how these novels and the reading pacts imbedded within them provoke a rereading of the Gospels themselves. Indeed, this subsequent benefit of stimulating readers to return to the original texts is often pointed out in defense of reading rewrites.⁶⁶

Yet, the Gospels are not merely reread but also reinterpreted, and this reinterpretation takes place in response to the rewrites and often in light of their perspectives.⁶⁷ Mieke Bal argues on behalf of this reversal in hermeneutics in which the prior text is interpreted in light of the later one, and she dubs such interpretation “preposterous” because that which came first chronologically (pre-) is now read according to that which was written latterly (post-).⁶⁸ Bal defends this inversion of the traditional order of interpretation by suggesting that any exegesis is preposterous by definition because interpreters always return to a text already influenced by their own culture, so inevitably they anachronistically read the original text. Preposterous readings are simply “willful and thoughtful deployment of anachronism in the interpretation of historical artifacts.”⁶⁹ These readings recognize the effect that intertextuality has on the interpretation of these now rewritten

65. Barclay, “Introduction,” 7.

66. E.g., Ben-Porat, “Saramago’s *Gospel*,” 95.

67. Ben-Porat, “Introduction,” 6.

68. Bal, *Caravaggio*, 7.

69. Bal, *Loving Yusuf*, 13.

PART I: From Jesus to Jesus Texts

sources. Beyond simply acknowledging the rewrite's role, preposterous readings welcome its voice into the hermeneutic conversation.⁷⁰

Such a “preposterous” reading of the Gospels will be undertaken in the second half of this monograph. Indeed, we will attempt to complete an entire hermeneutical circle of the reading pact in relation to one particular event in Jesus’ life—the Temptation. Beginning with an examination of the Gospel accounts themselves, we then will move on to examine how this episode has been rewritten in two of our Jesus novels, one which complements and one which competes with the Gospel accounts of that story. After comparing these versions with one another, we will return to one of the Gospels (Matthew) and offer a preposterous reading of its Temptation narrative in light of questions and issues raised by the rewrites. It is my intention that the subsequent “novel” exegesis of the Temptation will serve as an apology in itself for the benefit that rewrites can play in NT scholarship and also within the church’s understanding of the Gospel Jesus.

70. Such preposterous interpretation is not unlike what Kreitzer argues for when he examines the use of the NT in fiction and film in a work appropriately subtitled *On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film*).