

Paradigmatic Explanation: Strauss's Dangerous Idea

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Abstract: David Friedrich Strauss is best known for his mythical interpretation of the Gospel narratives. He opposed both the supernaturalists (who regarded the Gospel stories as reliable) and the rationalists (who offered natural explanations of purportedly supernatural events). His mythical interpretation suggests that many of the stories about Jesus were woven out of pre-existing messianic beliefs and expectations. Picking up this suggestion, I argue that the Gospel writers thought paradigmatically rather than historically. A paradigmatic explanation assimilates the event-to-be-explained to what is thought to be a prototypical instance of divine action. It differs from a historical or scientific explanation insofar as it does not specify the conditions under which it should be applied. It is, therefore, a wonderfully flexible way to understand the present in the light of the past.

The essential nature of myth is that it serves as a precedent, and every precedent contains an element of explanation, for it is a prototype for subsequent cases. But a precedent is not an explanation in the scientific sense... (Bronislaw Malinowski)

Introduction

Whatever else religions may do, they often purport to offer explanations of the way the world is. In the words of some recent writers,

causal explanation is a hallmark of religion. Around the world, in all periods of recorded history, scripture and theologies have told how the universe was created, why humans occupy a special place in the scheme of things, why seasonal changes and natural disasters occur, why some people triumph while others fail, and why everyone must occasionally suffer and eventually die.¹

To recognise this fact is not to argue that religions *arose* from a need to explain the world, an idea characteristic of the intellectualist theories of religion put forward by (for example) E. B. Tylor in the nineteenth century and Robin Horton in the twentieth. It is merely to note that, however religious representations first arose, one of the purposes to which they are put is an attempt to explain the way things are. To a student of the biblical literature, of course, this will come as no surprise. To take only a few examples, the prophets attempt to explain why the tragedy of the Babylonian Exile befell Israel, Matthew and Luke set out to explain how Jesus came to be born, and early Christian writers attempt to explain how his tomb came to be found empty and his followers convinced he was alive.

In what ways do religions attempt to explain states of affairs or events? How do these religious explanations differ from those offered in history and the sciences? These are the questions that have been

1 Bernard Spilka, Phillip Shaver and Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "A General Attribution Theory for the Psychology of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24 (1985), 1.

the focus of my recent research. In this course of this enquiry, I have found it useful to return to the work of David Friedrich Strauss. Of course, the questions I am trying to answer are not those being asked by Strauss. But it is the mark of a classic thinker that his work will shed light on issues that lie beyond his immediate concerns. What I am doing here is examining a particular form of purported explanation which is very common in religious contexts, and which was first identified by Strauss in the course of his work on the Gospels.

The Gospels and Myth

David Friedrich Strauss became notorious for his championing of what he called the “mythical” interpretation of the Gospels. Strauss does not deny that there exists a core of historically-reliable reportage within the Gospels. Indeed his second *Life of Jesus*, first published in 1864, devotes one half of its first volume to what he calls a “historical outline of the life of Jesus.” However, Strauss also argued that much of the Gospel narrative could only be understood as either legend or (more commonly) as myth. Now the problem with the term “myth” is that it has been used in such a variety of senses. So it will be important to spell out just how Strauss is using the term. In the formation of the mythological parts of the Gospels, he suggests, there were two processes at work.² The first involved the creation of stories about Jesus by way of the transfer to him of Jewish Messianic expectations. Clear examples of this kind of evangelical myth are to be found in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. For instance, the prophecy of Balaam in Num 24:17 has contributed to the creation of the story of the star that guided the magi in Matt 2:1-12.³ (Strauss notes that the creation of

2 David Friedrich Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus* (1864; London: Williams & Norgate, 1865), 1: 213.

3 David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* translated by George Eliot (1840; Ramsey, NJ: Sigler Press, 1994), 174.

this story may precede the writing of the Gospel of Matthew: the first evangelist may simply have taken it over from early Christian tradition.⁴) We may assume that the evangelists created such stories without any conscious intention to deceive.⁵ They truly believed they were recounting facts about Jesus, although they came to this conclusion in a way which seems to us uncritical and question-begging. How might the evangelists and their communities have reasoned? By a very simple process, Strauss argues. They would have thought, “such and such things must have happened to the Messiah; Jesus was the Messiah; therefore such and such things happened to him.”⁶

The second process lying behind the formation of evangelical myth involved a much more self-conscious kind of authorship.⁷ Here we may assume that the evangelists carefully crafted accounts to give expression to particular theological ideas. For Strauss, the Gospel of John offers the best examples of this style of myth. When creating the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-30), Strauss writes, “the author of the fourth Gospel must have been as much conscious that he was inventing freely, as Homer when he described the interview between ... Achilles and his divine mother.”⁸ Nonetheless, in doing so the evangelist believed he was transmitting a truth about Jesus. What kind of truth did the evangelist believe he was transmitting? Strauss’s discussion offers no clear answer to this question. He does say that the truth the evangelist had in mind “was not literal truth, or recounting what had really taken place, but the full and complete expression of the

4 Strauss, *The Life of Jesus*, 177.

5 Strauss, *The Life of Jesus*, 81; *A New Life of Jesus*, 1: 207.

6 Strauss, *The Life of Jesus*, 84.

7 In his second work on Jesus, Strauss allows “more room than before to the hypothesis of conscious and intentional fiction” (*A New Life of Jesus* 1: 213), but defends the use of the term “myth” for the product of even such a process.

8 Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus*, 1: 208.

idea.”⁹ But the evangelist gave expression to this idea by “project[ing] the figures of his mind not, like [the author of the Apocalypse] on the thunder clouds of the future, but on the steady wall of the past.”¹⁰ This suggests that the evangelist was writing an account which he wished his readers to understand as a report of actual events, even if he were conscious of their fictive quality.

This second description of what the evangelists were doing raises some difficult questions. Both in this context and elsewhere, Strauss indicates that he does not wish to convict the evangelists of fraud; he does not want to suggest that they were setting out to deceive.¹¹ But on his second account it is far from clear how this accusation can be avoided. However, I will not pursue this question here.¹² It is the first process identified by Strauss upon which I wish to focus. Here, I believe, Strauss has here arrived at an important insight about a common form of religious thought.¹³ This first process, you will recall, consists in the transfer to Jesus of Jewish Messianic expectations. Sometimes this transfer has resulted in the creation of new stories about Jesus, stories which would be “mythical” in the sense in which Strauss uses the term. But even where this has not

9 Ibid.,1: 209.

10 Ibid., 1: 209–10.

11 David Friedrich Strauss, “Hermann Samuel Reimarus and His Apology” (1877) §§ 38-40 translated by Ralph S. Frazer, *Reimarus: Fragments edited by Charles H. Talbot*; Lives of Jesus Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 44–45.

12 For some reflections on these issues, see Ulrich Luz, “Fiktivität und Traditionstreue im Matthäusevangelium im Lichte griechischer Literatur” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1993), 153–77.

13 Note, for instance, the close correspondence between Strauss’s account of the creation of the infancy narratives and Raymond Brown’s account (see *The Birth of the Messiah* Updated Edition [New York: Doubleday, 1993]). Brown carefully avoids the term “myth,” which he regards as unhelpful (ibid., 580). He also assumes that the evangelists’ theological claims remain valid, even when the narratives which support them are recognized to be largely fictional. Strauss, of course, was not so sanguine.

occurred, even where the evangelists have drawn in existing traditions about Jesus, those traditions are reshaped in the light of themes and expectations drawn from the canonical and non-canonical traditions of Israel. If we take, for instance, the passion narratives, it does seem that these are based on a pre-existing Christian tradition which contains a core of historical fact.¹⁴ But as Raymond Brown notes,

the first followers of Jesus would have known many things about crucifixion in general and almost surely some of the details about Jesus' crucifixion, e.g., what kind of cross was employed. Nevertheless, what is preserved in the narrative is mostly what echoes Scripture (division of garments, offering of vinegary wine, final words of Jesus).¹⁵

What interests me about this process is that it reflects a form of explanation (or, if you prefer, interpretation) widely found in religious contexts, which I have called paradigmatic explanation.¹⁶ I would like to examine this phenomenon more closely and offer a few reflections on its relationship to historical explanation.¹⁷

14 Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 15–16, 51.

15 *Ibid.*, 15.

16 The name owes something to Jacob Neusner's discussion of paradigmatic thought (see his *The Presence of the Past, the Pastness of the Present: History, Time and Paradigm in Rabbinic Judaism* [Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1996], summarised in his "Paradigmatic versus Historical Thinking: The Case of Rabbinic Judaism" *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 36 [1997], 353–77), although what he calls paradigmatic thinking represents a subset of the style of interpretation that I am describing. Note that my use of the term is not related to Thomas Kuhn's famous (but sometimes misleading) discussion of "paradigms" in the history of science.

17 As the epigraph to this paper suggests, my description of paradigmatic explanations owes something to Bronislaw Malinowski's account of the role of myth in preliterate societies. See, for instance, his *Myth in Primitive Psychology* *Psyche Miniatures* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner &

Paradigmatic Explanation

Before I go further, let me offer a few comments about the relationship between explanation and interpretation. Throughout this paper, I will be referring to paradigmatic explanation, but in this context the term explanation could be replaced by the term interpretation. To explain an event religiously is to interpret it as a particular kind of divine action, in much the same way that we interpret the actions of our fellow human beings. Why is this? A key idea here is that of the ubiquity of divine action. For classical Christian theism, God is thought of as directly or indirectly the cause of every event and of every feature of the world. This view is clearly set out in the writings of Thomas Aquinas,¹⁸ although it is, of course, much older. Indeed the great medieval theologian goes so far as to argue that God is responsible even for sinful actions, insofar as they are actions, although he does try to distance God from their sinful character.¹⁹ From this point of view, if the theist were asked of any event, “Why did this happen?”, she could simply reply “Because God willed it.” But since this same answer could be given in any context, in response to a query regarding any event, it would be (from the theist’s perspective) true but trivial. It would tell us nothing that we did not already know. Of course, a distinction must be made between those events in which God is seen as acting by way of secondary causes, and those events which he is believed to produce directly (miracles). But this distinction notwithstanding,²⁰ if a religious

Co., 1926), 38–39. Malinowski himself notes that biblical stories play a parallel role in the life of the Christian (*ibid.*, 21).

18 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a 105.5; *De potentia* 3.7; *Summa contra gentiles* 3.67.

19 Aquinas, *De malo* 3.2.

20 An intentional explanation is also required if one is to identify an alleged miracle, for such an event must be consistent with the character and purposes of God. This fact was first noted by John Stuart Mill (*A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles*

explanation is to be informative, it will set out what it is God is intending to achieve by acting as he has. A religious explanation, in other words, will need to take the form of an “intentional explanation,” in which one interprets an action as the expression of a particular purpose in the one acting.²¹

What I am calling “paradigms” are *prototypical instances of particular kinds of divine action*. When applied to an event to be explained, they represent one way in which the believer can identify what it is God is doing in this new context. There are two types of paradigms that I can detect within the biblical tradition.²² The first consists of descriptions of events that were thought of as still to be enacted (classically prophecies and apocalyptic visions). When these descriptions of divine action are used paradigmatically, it is by way of a claimed *identification* of the events to be explained with the predicted events. What was to be enacted by God, it is claimed, has now been brought about. Matthew’s Gospel, for example, frequently describes events in the life of Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy. The virginal conception of Jesus (Matt 1:22) is the fulfilment of Isa

of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation in *Collected Works*, edited by J. M. Robson [University of Toronto Press, 1973] 7: 626) and more recently by Douglas Erlandson (1977. “A New Look at Miracles.” *Religious Studies* 13 [1977], 423–24) and James Keller (“Contemporary Christian Doubts About the Resurrection” *Faith and Philosophy* 5:1 [Jan.1988], 51).

21 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 19–20.

22 The distinction I am making may well be one the evangelists would never have bothered to make. In Matthew’s mind, is the virginal conception of Jesus (Matt 1:23) the immediate fulfilment of the prophecy of Isa 7:14 (my first category) or an indirect fulfilment by way of a typological correspondence between events of Isaiah’s time and those of Jesus’ (my second category)? Presumably the former, but as Leonhard Goppelt writes (*Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* [1939] translated by Donald H. Madvig [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982], 103) “we cannot ask” the evangelists “this pointed question. Their only concern is that these statements ... were fulfilled in Jesus’ experience.”

7:14, the slaughter of the baby boys by King Herod (Matt 2:15) fulfils Jer 31:15, the return of the infant from Egypt (Matt 2:17) fulfils Hos 11:1, and so on. In a parallel manner, all four Gospels present the events following the death of Jesus as an enactment of the first stage of the end-time scenario spoken of in the apocalyptic writings of late second-Temple Judaism. As we will see later, to show the credibility of the former, you must show the credibility of the latter. If Albert Schweitzer was right, Jesus himself may have seen his imminent death as falling into the pattern of end-time suffering spoken of in that same apocalyptic tradition. (The first paradigmatic interpreter of the life of Jesus was probably Jesus himself.)

The second, more common type of paradigm is an event that is thought of as having already taken place. In the biblical tradition, these are the events of the Old Testament to which the New Testament writers refer. One thinks, for instance, of the identification of the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses (Num 21:9) with the crucified Jesus in John 3:14-15 or the identification of the water-giving rock of the Exodus account with Jesus in 1 Cor 10:4. But of course the same form of explanation and interpretation may be found within the Old Testament itself. Here one thinks, for instance, of Deutero-Isaiah's description of the return from Exile, cast in the pattern of the events of the Exodus. These form the *types* or *figures* so familiar to students of the New Testament and of patristic and medieval biblical interpretation (and so influential in the history of European art and literature).²³ As Northrop Frye has reminded us, if there is anything distinctive about the literary form of the Christian Bible, it is this typological structure.²⁴ But paradigmatic interpretation is also common outside the biblical tradition. For instance, it plays a major role in the shaping of the

23 Erich Auerbach, "Figura" (1941) translated by Ralph Manheim *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 11–76.

24 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature* (London: Ark, 1983), 79–80.

Qur'an, where events in the life of Muhammad (for instance) are understood by reference to the paradigmatic instance of Abraham.²⁵ In the broader world of magico-religious thought, we may also speak of *minor paradigms*, the stories told by believers to one another of successful instances of prayer or, in different contexts, successful magical spells.²⁶ While these have lesser authority than the great communal paradigms, they play an important role in allowing people to understand new experiences religiously.²⁷

Where a past event functions paradigmatically by being applied to a new situation, the result is a form of (explicit or implicit) *metaphorical identification*. In his study of symbolism, anthropologist Dan Sperber has spelt out the cognitive processes that are thereby set in train.²⁸ Since the implicit identification (such as “Jesus is Moses”) is literally (and obviously) false, this identification sets in motion what Sperber calls a “symbolic mechanism” in the mind. As hearers or readers we try to make sense

25 See Gregory W. Dawes, “The Sense of the Past in the New Testament and the Qur’an” in *Islamic and Christian Cultures: Conflict or Dialogue?* Bulgarian Philosophical Studies III edited by Plamen Makariev (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values & Philosophy, 2001), 9-31, available online at http://www.crvp.org/book/Series04/IVA-21/chapter_i.htm

26 On the “everyday myths” which surround magic (even in societies that lack the grand myths that so interested Malinowski), see E. E. Evans-Pritchard, “The Morphology and Function of Magic: A Comparative Study of Trobriand and Zande Ritual and Spells” *American Anthropologist* 31 (1929), 629–30.

27 A myth, at least in Strauss’s first sense of this term, is simply a paradigmatic interpretation of a particular event (such as the birth of Jesus), which gives rise to the creation of stories about that event (such as that of the magi).

28 Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (1974) translated by Alice L. Morton; Cambridge Studies and Papers in Social Anthropology 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press / Paris: Hermann, 1975), 115–49. For a more concise description, see Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 56–57.

of the apparently false statement by searching for relevant analogies. Relevant analogies are generally not difficult to find. This is one of the factors which gives rise to the peculiar fertility of religious thought, its ability to produce apparently endless interpretations of the same paradigmatic event. The paradigmatic event itself as has many interpretations as there exist situations to which it might be applied. Once it is applied to a particular situation, the number of resemblance that may be found is limited only by the imagination of the interpreter. It follows that there is no end to the process of interpreting paradigmatic explanations, short of exhaustion on the part of the interpreter or audience.

Paradigmatic explanations are not limited to religious contexts. Secular examples abound, particularly in everyday parlance. “Iraq is America’s next Vietnam” would be a contemporary instance.²⁹ Here the events of the Vietnam war (or at least a particular interpretation of those events) function as a lens through which one views the involvement of the United States in Iraq. The metaphorical identification of the two situations invites the hearer to search for resemblances. Indeed there is a sense in use of the paradigm creates the very resemblances of which it claims to speak, insofar as it sets the hearer’s imagination to work to discover analogies. (Of course, the fact that a suitably disposed hearer will probably find such analogies does not mean that the paradigm is necessarily illuminating.) It is not hard to see that paradigmatic interpretation will be a wondrously flexible device, particularly in the hand of an imaginative interpreter. Cognitively speaking, we may say that religious traditions survive on the indeterminacy of their paradigms and the flexibility of their modes of interpretation.

29 I am indebted to Andrew Rutherford, an Honours student at the University of Otago, for this example. Some months after I wrote this, on the 6 April 2004, Senator Edward Kennedy employed this paradigm, stating that “Iraq has become George Bush’s Vietnam.”

This flexibility is all the greater when one takes into account the process of accommodation and assimilation that typically accompanies the application of a paradigm. I have already noted that in the Qur'an the events of Muhammad's life are interpreted in the light of the paradigmatic life of Abraham. But it is important to note that the Qur'an's account of the life of Abraham (along with the lives of the other prophets) is itself reshaped in the light of the experience of Muhammad.³⁰ In the formation of the Gospels this process can also be seen at work. On the one hand, the events of Jesus' life are re-described so as to allow for their paradigmatic interpretation. Mark's description of Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 1:13) seems crafted to call to mind what we regard as non-canonical Jewish traditions regarding Adam.³¹ The story of the stranger driving out demons (Mark 9:38–40), seems worded so as to call to mind its Old Testament parallel (Num 11:26–30).³² Similarly, in the entry to Jerusalem, Matthew has provided a second animal (Matt 21:7, compare Mark 11:7), so that his account will be a more literal fulfilment of Zech 9:9.³³ On the other hand (but less commonly), the Old Testament passages which function paradigmatically are sometimes reshaped to highlight their application to Jesus. In defending the conduct of his disciples picking grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28), Jesus re-describes what David does in 1 Sam 21:1–6, so as to accommodate the Old Testament story to the situation at hand.³⁴ (Whether Jesus himself did this, or the evangelist, is of little significance here: both were presumably capable of thinking paradigmatically.) The alleged biblical citation in Matt 2:23 (“He shall be called a Nazorean”) does not correspond to any single Old Testament verse, but seems to be a free combination of Isa 4:3 and

30 Dawes, “The Sense of the Past,” 18–19.

31 Goppelt, *Typos*, 98–99.

32 *Ibid.*, 76.

33 *Ibid.*, 87.

34 *Ibid.*, 85.

Judg 16:17.³⁵ Similarly, the scripture citation in John 19:36 (“Not a bone of his shall be broken”) seems to be an adaptation of Ps 34:20, perhaps in the light of Exod 12:46 and/or Num 9:12.³⁶

It would be interesting to take this discussion of paradigmatic explanations further by comparing them with other forms of explanation. But this is to enter an area of lively philosophical debate. I will take the risk of making just one suggestion. Many forms of explanation — such as those involving scientific theories — depend on some kind of general statement about the natural world or the behaviour of human beings. I am not saying that the general statement in question need be a “law” in the strict sense of that term. (Some would argue that it could be a mere accidental generalization.³⁷) Nor am I saying that all explanations are deductive in form, with a general statement as the major premise and the *explanandum* as the conclusion.³⁸ (The role played by generalizations may vary from one type of explanation to another.) What I am saying is that many forms of explanation appeal to theories which employ statements of the form “all *As* are *F*,” where *A* is a type of individual or event and *F* is some feature that may be predicated of it.

This is particularly important in the sciences. A scientific theory would not be testable unless it applied to more than one instance and unless it spelt out the class of instances to which it is applicable. It is a much debated issue whether historical explanations — which are typically narratives of particular events — also involve appeal to law-like generalizations. On some occasions they clearly do.³⁹ The

35 Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 223–25.

36 For a discussion, see Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1185–86. Brown regards the Exodus and Numbers citations as the primary reference.

37 Marc Lange, *Natural Laws in Scientific Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2000) 268–71.

38 This is the famous “deductive-nomological” model of explanation first espoused by Carl G. Hempel (“Studies in the Logic of Explanation” *Philosophy of Science* 15 [1948] 135–75).

39 Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* Morningside Edition (Columbia

appeal may be explicit, as is the case when historians make use of social-scientific theories, or it may be implicit, as when a historical explanation depends on some common-sense generalization about human behaviour. Some would argue that intentional explanations — where we explain an action by spelling out the reasons why the agent acted as she did — are an exception to this rule.⁴⁰ Since historical explanations take many forms, there may be other exceptions. But they need not concern us here.

What about paradigmatic explanations? It is true that insofar as a paradigm embodies a pattern that can be reapplied in new contexts, it does resemble a general statement. But what makes a paradigm different from a theoretical statement is that *it does not specify its context of application*. Nineteenth-century African Americans may have understood their experience against the backdrop of the Exodus events, but there is nothing about the biblical story of the Exodus that demands this application. Exodus simply speaks of a particular set of events: it makes no claim that other instances of slavery will follow this pattern. Indeed the Bible makes very few general statements of this sort. In general — here we must recognize the complexity of the Hebrew Bible, which includes the Wisdom literature — the Bible relates a very particular history. It is the later biblical writers (such as the evangelists) and Jewish and Christian interpreters who take the events of this history as paradigmatic. In other words, the biblical paradigms are not designed as paradigms; they are simply used this way. It follows that the biblical paradigms

University Press, 1985), chap. 10. *Narration and Knowledge* is a revised version of Danto's *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965).

40 Contemporary discussion of these issues takes as its starting-point Donald Davidson's 1963 article "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" (*Essays on Actions and Events* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980], 3–19). Davidson argues that reasons are causes and that intentional actions must therefore be covered by causal laws. However, an identification of the causal laws involved may require a redescription of the action. It is therefore "an error to think that no explanation has been given until a law has been produced" (*ibid.*, 17).

are patterns that are always available, but never compulsory.⁴¹ In practice, particular religious communities will apply these paradigms only to a very specific set of events. Other events that could be interpreted paradigmatically are not treated in this way. Christian interpreters, for instance, would be unlikely to use the biblical account of Moses to interpret the life of Muhammad, although it is not difficult to see how this might be done.

Why Does It Matter?

Why is this important? What purpose is served by identifying and giving a name to this particular style of religious explanation (or, if you prefer, religious interpretation)? Well, one reason for doing so that it helps us to understand why there *exists* a historical Jesus question. Why do modern historical accounts of the life of Jesus differ so profoundly from the accounts offered by the evangelists? Much ink has been spilt on the nature of historical explanation, and insofar as historical explanations embrace intentional explanations, that discussion is far from ended. But less attention has been paid to the structure of religious explanations, which are also intentional explanations, but which are grounded quite differently from explanations in history or the social sciences. It was to Strauss's credit that he not only offered a particular interpretation of the Gospels; in doing so he grasped at least one of the distinctive ways in which the evangelists interpreted the life of Jesus.

The significance of these reflections may be illustrated by examining the work of a contemporary theologian in whose writings paradigmatic and historical explanations are confused. That theologian is Wolfhart Pannenberg. As is well known, Pannenberg is reacting against the apparent fideism of those schools of theology inspired by Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. He insists that the facts on which Christian faith is based must be (in principle, at least)

41 For similar remarks about typology, see Goppelt, *Typos*, 221, 232.

accessible to all.⁴² Divine revelation is not a kind of mystery, accessible only to believers. In Pannenberg's view, this idea would represent a kind of gnostic heresy. If Christian faith is to be a rational choice, it must be based on the events whose existence and character can be demonstrated independently of that faith. This principle must apply to the resurrection of Jesus, which plays a key role in Pannenberg's theology.⁴³ This, then, is the challenge which Pannenberg sets himself, to demonstrate that the resurrection of Jesus is a historically demonstrable event.⁴⁴ I do not want to enter into the details of his discussion here: I have done so elsewhere.⁴⁵ All I want to note is the role played by paradigmatic thinking in Pannenberg's argument.

On the face of it, the task Pannenberg sets himself seems hopeless. In reconstructing a past event (or in judging the reliability of his source), a historian would normally ask: "What kinds of events normally occur in similar circumstances?" He would, as Ernst Troeltsch reminds us, employ some kind of reasoning by analogy.⁴⁶ But remember that the resurrection of Jesus, if it were to have occurred, would have been a singular event. An event of this type would never have happened before (cf. 1 Cor 15:20) and it has never happened again. (I am assuming here that the New Testament is not

42 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation" in *Revelation as History* edited by Wolfhart Pannenberg (1961) translated by David Granskou (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 135.

43 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man* (1964) translated by Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM, 1968), 109.

44 There are some indications that in his later work Pannenberg has weakened this claim, as I have noted elsewhere; see my *The Historical Jesus Question: The Challenge of History to Religious Authority* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 336. But it is Pannenberg's earlier and stronger claims that I am evaluating here.

45 Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Question*, 332–41.

46 Ernst Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology" (1898) in *The Historical Jesus Quest: A Foundational Anthology* edited by Gregory W. Dawes (Leiden: Deo, 1999), 32–33.

speaking of the mere resuscitation of a corpse.) The historian must therefore make a judgement of probability. Here is a report of an event which, if it actually occurred, would run counter to our otherwise uniform experience of the world. Which is more likely? That the reported event did occur, or that those reporting it were deceiving or deceived? This judgement will be informed by the fact that we do have ample evidence of self-deception and of the growth of mythology in religious contexts.⁴⁷

This is a familiar argument, first put forward by David Hume. But if it is applicable to any report of a miracle, it is surely applicable to the reports concerning resurrection.⁴⁸ Implicitly, Pannenberg recognizes the difficulty, for he insists that belief in the resurrection of Jesus is plausible only if one accepts the apocalyptic vision of the end-time general resurrection of the dead.⁴⁹ But of course this is to reason paradigmatically. It is to interpret the events following the death of Jesus, not by reference to any general statements about the way things occur, but by reference to a predicted action of God which will occur (if at all) only at the end of time.

Nonetheless, Pannenberg does not abandon his quest for a rational faith. He sets out to demonstrate the truth (his term is “universal validity”⁵⁰) of the apocalyptic vision. But how could one do this? The critical thinker — who proportions his belief to the

47 Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (1966; Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 88.

48 Whatever the role played by law-like generalizations in other forms of historical explanation, the reports of Jesus’ resurrection must face this objection, that they are contradicted by every other instance of death that we know of.

49 Pannenberg, “Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation,” 146; *Jesus – God and Man*, 81; *Systematic Theology* vol 2 (1991) translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 348–9, 362.

50 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2: 351.

evidence — will apply the same kind of probabilistic reasoning to predictions of a general resurrection as to reports of the resurrection of Jesus. After a few attempts to render the apocalyptic vision plausible (which fall far short of demonstrating its truth),⁵¹ Pannenberg appeals to the resurrection of Jesus in support of belief in the general resurrection.⁵² Needless to say, such circularity can prove nothing. What has Pannenberg actually demonstrated? Firstly, that belief in the resurrection can only be plausible to one who thinks paradigmatically; secondly, that appeal to this particular paradigm cannot be justified in a non-circular fashion.

This conclusion raises a question about the origins of resurrection belief. If the kind of probabilistic reasoning on which the historian must rely rules out belief in the general resurrection, how could that belief have become established in the first place? Here, of course, we can only speculate. All we can say with any degree of confidence is that a clear belief in the resurrection of the dead appears in Jewish literature only in the second-century b.c.e. One can only surmise — and this will offer us a final example of paradigmatic reasoning — that those who formulated this belief drew upon a number of widely-accepted descriptions of divine action.⁵³ These include the statement regarding national restoration found in Hosea 6:2 (“After two days he will revive us, on the third day he will raise us up. . .”), the vision of Ezekiel 37 (the valley of dry bones), and the psalm of thanksgiving attributed to Jonah (Jonah 2:2-9). It is from such accounts of divine action, treated as paradigms, that belief in the resurrection of the dead could develop. The development of this belief would have

51 Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, 85–88; *Systematic Theology* vol 3 (1993) translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 539–43.

52 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3: 544–45, 550, 593.

53 I am leaving aside the far more speculative suggestion that they drew upon non-Jewish myths regarding dying or rising gods or (less speculatively, but still without concrete evidence) that they were dependent upon Persian (Zoroastrian) eschatology.

formed part of the general heightening of prophetic thought that gave rise to the apocalyptic literature. It would have been given particular impetus by the problem of martyrdom in the Maccabean period. The result of this process would have been the apocalyptic end-time scenario. It was this scenario which (as Pannenberg notes) the earliest Christian transferred to their visionary experiences to produce what Strauss would regard as the greatest of all Christian myths, that of the resurrection of Jesus.