

*Reading Faithfully. Writings from the Archives.* 2 vols. By Hans W. Frei, edited by Mike Higton and Mark Alan Bowald. Pp. xx + 226; vii + 227. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015 and 2016. Pbk. ISBN 13: 978-1-62564-209-7 and 978-1498278676. \$30.00 and \$29.00.

Hans W. Frei (1922-1988), the Yale theologian and historian of theology, has had an influence on Anglophone theology and biblical interpretation over the past 45 years that is out of all proportion to the volume of material he published in his lifetime. David Kelsey's widely acclaimed theological anthropology, *Eccentric Existence*, is one of the more recent and perhaps the most significant work exhibiting that influence in key aspects of its method and content. In part, that influence can be reckoned to his impact as a teacher and supervisor, warmly commemorated by George Hunsinger in his Forward to these volumes. It is also testament, however, to the depth and generativity of the insight readers have found in his published works, and which John Webster celebrates in his Afterword.

Frei is best known for *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) and *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). Yet he wrote many other pieces, either unpublished, or published in now obscure places, which greatly assist us in better understanding his (unfinished) life's project: the examination and critically constructive reworking of modern Christology and its hermeneutical bases in its social and cultural contexts. The two volumes of *Reading Faithfully* follow two previous posthumous collections of Frei's other writings, which were both edited by Frei's former students, George Hunsinger and the late William Placher: *Theology and Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). It is difficult to imagine studying Frei seriously without those latter volumes and it will become difficult to imagine studying him in depth without attending also to the two volumes of *Reading Faithfully*.

These two volumes gather up a mixture of 'writings from the archives' – mostly the archive of Frei's papers at Yale Divinity School, New Haven – and previously published material that is difficult to get hold of. Volume 1 organises its contents in part by genre and in part by discipline, into Letters, Hermeneutics and Theology. Volume 2 gathers texts on the history of modern Western theology. The editors provide a good, brief overview of the provenance and contents of these texts in their Introduction to Volume 1.

Some of these texts have long been made available online by the editors (and still are at <http://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/HansFreiTranscripts/>). Others were

published in out-of-print collections. One essay in volume 1, 'Of the Resurrection of Christ', was already republished in *Theology and Narrative*, but appears here fitly partnering previously unpublished companion pieces on the Going Down of Christ into Hell and Of the Holy Ghost: all three were written for a projected book on the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. The letters, selected from the Yale archive, have never been published, nor several other pieces in volume 1. Two come also from Frei's Yale papers: one from very early in Frei's career on 'The Place of Theology in the Liberal Arts Curriculum', written for the Dean of Wabash College, where he was then teaching, in 1953, the other a later lecture from 1978 on the study of Religious Sensibility, which might better have been placed as a methodological accompaniment to the historical studies of Volume 2. Volume 1 also includes two texts that have come to light from the papers of Frei's close friend, the church historian John Woolverton, at Virginia Theological Seminar (who co-commissioned Frei's pieces on the three Articles). The first is a fascinating, unfinished discussion of forms of Christian life in quest of Christ's presence, possibly from the 1970s; the second a sermon Frei preached at Woolverton's ordination in 1954.

These and other unpublished texts have benefitted from careful editorial cleaning up and additional notes detailing unidentified or vague references, manuscript deletions, insertions and marginalia, which can be fascinating (and sometimes entertainingly self-deprecating). All but the Wabash paper and the most recently discovered texts are referenced where possible to Mike Higton's very helpful chronologically ordered annotated bibliography of Frei's works from Higton's *Christ, Providence and History* (the bibliography is also available online: <https://community.dur.ac.uk/mike.higton/Freibib.html>). *Reading Faithfully* volume 1 also includes a chronology of the pieces in both volumes, including the new finds.

George Hunsinger's Forward to Volume 1 identifies Frei's real significance in his concern for the literary way in which the gospel stories set forth the singularity of Jesus, together with the lasting achievement of his analysis in *Eclipse*. He also offers readers a very useful crystallisation of key themes in Frei's work – the primacy of the descriptive, the particular, the non-apologetic, and the non-theoretical' (p. xi) – but makes little comment on the significance or content of the texts in these collections. The inclusion of John Webster's essay ('Hans Frei, Scripture, Reading and the Rhetoric of Theology') as an Afterward is also welcome. There are useful comments here for appreciating the particular characteristics and significance of Frei's theological writings: his 'essays in practical hermeneutics' (p. 205), as Webster aptly calls them. Despite, or perhaps because of Frei's theological reticence, his writings offer 'quiet provocation' to further dogmatic work. The essay, however, mostly pursues that work rather than commenting further on Frei himself. What more

might be said, then, about the significance of the pieces included in *Reading Faithfully* for understanding Frei's thought?

While some cast some light on Frei's relationships with friends, former students and critics, the chief value of these texts lies principally in the way they clarify, defend, amplify and extend the insights, arguments and analyses of his historical and constructive theological and hermeneutical work. Frei's constructive arguments and historical investigations inform one another and need to be read together.

Constructive concerns are rarely far from his mind when commenting on the history of theology; and his extensive, subtle and usually illuminating historical studies frame and contextualise his constructive endeavours. Thus one really needs to read both volumes, and there is an argument for beginning with Volume 2 as much as with Volume 1, or indeed using the chronology to order one's reading so as to get a sense both of Frei's development and of the interaction of the historical and constructive sides to his project.

If we follow this last suggestion for a moment, the earliest texts offer a fresh perspective on Frei as a young theologian and teacher. His outspoken paper for the Dean of Wabash responds robustly to implied suspicions that the study of religion is indoctrinating, and defends its place in the curriculum. Frei's critique here of bifurcations of theory and practice in the study of religion faintly foreshadows their integration in his own later theological and methodological writings and the practical concern of the latter (sometimes missed by his critics). The basis for his argument here, however, is that the object of the study of religion is God, in respect of whom alone such bifurcations are absurd, so that the study of religion requires their integration on the part of humans made in God's image and is thus (positively or negatively) self-involving. It is an argument that, in sharp contrast to Frei's theological method, and his policy as chair of the department of Religion at Yale, in the 1980s, both collapses the study of religion into the study of theology and does not examine the ambiguity of the concept of God in that study given its philosophical and Christian uses. Yet Frei's later sensitivity to these points is anticipated, to some extent, by his rejection here of whatever his colleagues meant at the time by 'the comparative study of religion' as something prejudicial mostly to non-Christian religions, i.e. as covertly Christian-centred and distorting of the study of those religions. Frei's sermon at Woolverton's ordination also contrasts with his later ecclesiological statements in its conceptuality and tone (and its overtly episcopalian ecclesiology!). Yet here too there is a significant, albeit qualified, continuity with his mature theology. It can be found first in his affirmation of the ecclesial work of historical memory, of the church's witness to its connection to Israel and to creation, and thereby to that of all creatures to their pasts, in a striking interpretation of episcopacy and apostolic succession. It is also there in Frei's

construal of the church's witness in the world in his interpretation of the cure of souls as the embodiment of God's peace to a generation for whom conflict had come to seem primary and perpetual, whether the war was cold or hot.

Frei's other early writings here are his essays on 'Niebuhr's Theological Background' and 'The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr', his doctoral supervisor, reproduced in volume 2. These are important for understanding the problems that lie in the background to both *Eclipse* and *The Identity of Jesus Christ*: the methodological problems thrown up by the nineteenth century German Academic tradition of theology, and the difficulties and tensions evinced in the contrasting ways in which Karl Barth, Ernst Troeltsch and the younger Niebuhr brother sought to overcome them. Frei's appreciation in his second Niebuhr essay of the integration of Christ's person and his acts in Niebuhr's moral Christology (at the end of *Christ and Culture*) also anticipates his own approach to Christology in *Identity*, as Hunsinger, Higton and Paul DeHart have pointed out. Frei's historical concerns are also displayed in two lectures (the second incomplete) on the different ways in which Lessing and Kant recognised the limits of rationalism and sought to take account of it in their modes of reinterpreting religion. Both show Frei's capacity to enter sympathetically and illuminatingly into the mentalities, concerns and thought-worlds of past thinkers, and find something interesting and original to say about the way they realised their basic concerns (much as he had with Barth in his dissertation).

Most of the other texts in Volume 1 relate in some way or other to Frei's constructive theological and hermeneutical proposals, whether implicit in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* or explicit in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, and are best read in the light of them and related essays in *Theology and Narrative* and *Types*. The most significant of these, in my view, are as follows. First: there are those, mostly from the 1970s, which seek to defend or clarify in the face of criticism the stances he takes in *Eclipse* and *Identity* on the character of the narrative meaning in the canonical gospels and its relationship to truth claims, including historical truth claims, (see 'Letter to Gary Comstock'; 'Letter to William Placher' and 'The Specificity of Reference' in particular, which should be read alongside his Response to Carl F.H. Henry in *Theology and Narrative*), and on what it means to understand such stories ('On Interpreting the Christian Story'). Several well-worn criticisms of Frei suffer from failing to understand his position on these points, and these texts, together with his essay 'On the Resurrection' are helpful in getting a more accurate view. The other commentaries on three of the Thirty-Nine Articles, which gloss christological and pneumatological aspects of the argument of *Identity*, are similarly significant.

Second, there are those texts which link his project to his interpretation of Barth as a narrative theologian (see especially 'Scripture as Realistic Narrative', which should

be read alongside his essay 'Karl Barth: Theologian' in *Theology and Narrative*). Frei's reading of Barth developed through his life, and these texts constitute an important stage in that development which seems to have influenced Frei's own constructive position, and constitutes a reading of the later Barth that is still worth consideration.

Third, there are those texts which relate to Frei's proposals about providence, the figural reading of history and the shape of the life of discipleship as figures of Christ (see 'Letter to Julian Hartt', 'History, Salvation-History, and Typology', and 'Saint, Sinner and Pilgrim'). These are dense and at times unclear, but help interpret these themes in the latter sections of *Identity*, and underscore their importance in his thought.

Finally, there are the drafts of the lectures and remarks Frei made in 1986 at a conference celebrating Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Wendel-Moltmann. Here both the doctrine of God that is often close to the surface in so many of Frei's theological writings (and some of his writings about the history of theology) is brought to the surface and expounded more fully than perhaps anywhere else in his corpus. It is no accident, perhaps, that here too his tendency to link doctrine to social ethics (or political theology) is also found in one of its fullest expressions. These reflections complement Frei's account of providence and the figural reading of history, and should be read alongside the latter sections of *Identity*, his essay 'On the Holy Ghost', and Frei's essay, 'H. Richard Niebuhr on History, Church and Nation' in *Theology and Narrative*.

In the pieces collected here, Frei begins to develop a contextually pragmatic, realistic yet hopeful vision of Christian political witness and activism that privileges the poor and oppressed and criticises and resists their oppressors; one whose hopefulness and contextual pragmatism alike are grounded in faith in the past, present and future gifts in creation, reconciliation and eschatological redemption of the God who is not only impatient for God's future, but also patient in sustaining and ordering the time and places in which we live. They begin to develop the implications of Frei's theology for a political theology or social ethics which, as I hope to argue in a forthcoming book, is the direction in which so much of his project was oriented and for which it may yet be fruitful in ways that are as yet under-explored. Inasmuch as Frei was right that all Christian theology is political theology (p. 182), they are perhaps the most significant elements of this two-volume collection, and not only for the study of Hans Frei.

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