Introduction

Telling the Story, Again

Christians refer to the gospels as the Greatest Story Ever Told, and an argument can certainly be made for that moniker. The main character is a young man with ignoble beginnings who arrives out of nowhere to bring hope to an occupied people. His following grows to such an extent that the authorities become threatened, and they seek a way to kill him. One of his followers goes to the authorities in secret and betrays the one he had chosen to follow. After the main character is put to death, there are rumors of his resurrection and promise to come again.

This story has all of the elements of a great narrative: intrigue, conflict, drama. It is, to use an oft-repeated phrase, a page-turner. Why, then, would writers come back to this story time and time again in order to try to improve upon it? First of all, there is the story itself. The authors can rely on an already given plotline that is clearly a great story; there is no need for them to create a story from their imaginations when they can draw on one that many people are at least reasonably familiar with already.

However, the main reason writers continue to come back to the story of Jesus is not because of what the gospels tell us, but what they do not. The main character is a young man without a past; readers see a birth story, one incident when he was twelve, and then he is roughly thirty years old. His father completely disappears after the incident in the temple when Jesus is twelve, and his relationships with his mother and brothers seem strained at best. His followers have no background, either, save for an occasional mention of employment or, in Peter’s case, a mother-in-law. And, oh yes, he just might be God, as well.

1Reynolds Price not only argues that the gospel of Mark is ”the most influential of human books” (38), but he says that he assigns his students to write a gospel because ”the career of a particular Palestinian Jew of the first century and the effects of that life on world history have proved so magnetic in their mystery as to demand ceaseless watch and question by human beings, whose minds have ranged from the caliber of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin through numerous lunatics, sadists, masochists, plain readers, and selfless ministers to the sufferings of others” (234–35).
Not only are readers not given basic information about the main character, they are given none of the motivations of the secondary characters. It seems that “the Gospels provide novelists with relatively few clear-cut characters. Most of the disciples are leveled down to a faceless chorus from which only Peter and Judas emerge in any sharp detail. As a result, we find in these novels primarily those few figures who are clearly defined by their function in the New Testament” (Ziolkowski 278). No one knows why Peter willingly left his fishing trade to follow Jesus or why Matthew gave up his job as a tax collector, and no one even knows what Thaddeus does, more or less why he left it. Of course, the greatest mystery when it comes to motivation is why Judas betrayed Jesus. Was it simple greed? Was Judas a nationalist who was disappointed when Jesus didn’t live up to his idea of the Messiah? Or was Judas forcing Jesus’ hand by turning him in? Or protecting him from authorities in Jerusalem whom Judas thought he knew better than Jesus? Or did Jesus want Judas to turn him in so that he could be crucified for the world’s sins?

Another problem is Jesus’ claimed dual nature. How can someone be both God and man at the same time? What kinds of temptations did he suffer, and how did he deal with them? How did he react when he first realized that he was the Son of God? Did he ever think of giving it all up and having a nice, normal life?

All of these questions are left unanswered in not one narrative about Jesus’ life, but four different narratives. They present different parables, different miracles, even different teachings, but none of them tell readers what the characters are thinking, what motivates them. Instead, they tell the same basic story of hope and betrayal and hope again, yet it is a story that moves people to change their lives, even without the motivations and thoughts of the characters.

Authors have different ways of trying to retell this story, though, and rather than trying to focus on the multiple ways, I will focus on one. In Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus, Theodore Ziolkowski outlines five types of gospel novels: (1) fictionalizing biography; (2) Jesus redivivus; (3) the imitatio Christi; (4) “pseudonyms” of Christ; and (5) fictional transfigurations. The Jesus
redivivus consists of “stories set in modern times, in which—miraculously—the historical Jesus appears” (17) while the imitatio Christi is a group of “novels in which the hero makes up his mind to live consistently as Jesus would have lived had he been born into our world” (23). Thus, Sheldon’s In His Steps would be an example of an imitatio Christi while Rilke’s Visions of Christ or Sinclair’s They Call Me Carpenter would be an example of Jesus redivivus. The “pseudonyms” of Christ are “restricted to those works in which, all questions of meaning aside, the events as set down immutably in the Gospels prefigure the action of the plot” (26). Ziolkowski believes that this category “has often been expanded to include so many different works that, as a literary category, it has become virtually meaningless” and that “no character who lies down or dies with his arms outstretched—like the heroes of Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea and Kafka’s The Trial—is safe from the critical cross” (28). Thus, it is not a terribly useful category any longer, but it can still be clearly distinguished from the fictionalizing biographies that I am concerned with. The fictional transfigurations that make up the subject of Ziolkowski’s book are “fictional narrative[s] in which the characters and the action, irrespective of meaning or theme, are prefigured to a noticeable extent by figures and events popularly associated with the life of Jesus, as it is known from the Gospels” (6). Thus, his work deals with Kazantzakis’ The Greek Passion, but not The Last Temptation of Christ. Instead, works like The Last Temptation of Christ and the other four I deal with in this book are “fictionalizing biographies,” in Ziolkowski’s scheme of classification. In a fictionalizing biography, the author attempts to re-create Jesus in his historical setting based on the events of the gospel, but is in no way slavishly dependent upon the gospel stories.

In each chapter, I try to examine the different characters and the way that the five authors have presented them. In the first chapter, I talk about the religious background of the authors and what may have motivated them to retell the story of Jesus. Then, in the second chapter, I examine their views of the gospel accounts, the stories they hope to tell anew. From then on, each character is examined with a biblical and historical background of the characters. These backgrounds are not intended to be comprehensive, as
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book upon book has been written about many of these characters; instead they are merely intended to show where the authors might have gathered some of their ideas for their incarnations of the characters.

The novels are compelling largely due to the changes they make to that original story. The interest in these novels would be significantly lower if not for the interest in the story of Jesus in the first place; thus, it is the changes I try to focus on, with the gospels serving as foils to highlight what takes place in the novels.

Other authors will tell and tell again the story of Jesus, going back to that rich story for inspiration. The insistence with which they do so only works to confirm its place as the Greatest Story Ever Told.