

Writing Jesus: Issues and Challenges in Telling the Christ Story

Jay Parini | September 28, 2015 | 3:30 p.m.

The book that I wrote about Jesus – *Jesus: The Human Face of God* -- is a brief study of the contours of the life of Christ. I take a look at the major teachings of Christianity, and what I call the *mythos* of Jesus, going back to the Greek word for a story with symbolic implications. The title alone (a phrase adapted from St. Augustine) should suggest something of the lines of my work here. This book is about the role that Jesus plays in the larger story of the spirit's working in this world. It was a book I wanted badly to write, in part because I can only understand something when I've written about it, so this was all part of my own education. Writing the book also forced me to dig into my own Christian faith in challenging ways, trying to figure out – and put into language – whatever struck me as true.

Such work meant redefining a lot of terms, even retranslating any number of key Greek words and phrases, especially those that skew our thinking in what may be familiar directions. I'm thinking of words like "salvation" or "saved," for instance: key terms for most Christians. I was soon hard at work trying to find a fresh language for experiences that are common enough, and have been common to people within various Christian traditions, for two millennia at least; that is, there is an experience of transformation – personal and communal -- that is central to the Christian idea. It's about living with and within change.

Like many of you – especially here at Baylor – I grew up in a Christian environment, and specifically, a Baptist one. My mother's family had been Baptists for a long time, and she never wavered in her 97 years of being a conventional and always solid Baptist. My father, raised a Roman Catholic, joined the Baptist Church when he married my mother, and in due course he became a Baptist minister. So the transformation, for him, was quite distinct.

For me, I always liked the business of church, its rituals and traditions, and savored the unfolding of the church year at it made its sharp pivots at Christmas and Easter. I liked the sense of people engaging with the holy spirit – an activity that I would later rewrite in Emersonian terms, searching for words that more effectively described my own experience than anything I'd quite encountered at the Jackson Street Baptist Church in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where for my first eighteen years I passed a great deal of time.

Like every Christian, I struggled with Doubt – I put a capital letter on that word. In the early twenty-first century, I suspect the word should probably be Indifference. That certainly describes my experience of religion among the students I teach. In a course on Poetry and Spirituality, which I offer each year at Middlebury College, I begin the seminar by asking each student to say something about his or her religious background or affiliations. A fair number of them hesitate, and then say: "Well, I'm spiritual but not religious." Most have had little or no experience of church. Now these are very smart young people, but when I ask them what language the Bible was written



in, which I always do, roughly half of them vote for Latin. I suppose they associate Latin with the kind of Harry Potterish mumbo-jumbo that you get in the movies. Another group always claims that the New Testament was written in Hebrew, which many of them refer to as Jewish. Last year, a student asked me in a faint voice: “Didn’t Jesus actually speak in Armenian?”

When I got to college in 1966, as a freshman – I know, I can do the math -- at least I vaguely knew that Jesus didn’t speak in Armenian, though I had more or less been told that the King James Version of the Bible was essentially the only reliable source of inspiration. My mother once said to me: “If the King James Version was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.”

I don’t want to make this into an elaborate memoir; but let’s just say that the foundations of my faith were given the usually shake and bake when I took courses in the religion department. I began to read modern theology, including such figures as Rudolf Otto, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, and others. For the first time I learned about the synoptic approach to the gospels, where one passage is compared to another and differences are duly noted. I suddenly understood that the four gospels were distinct stories, with some converging and even contradictory material, written for different audiences. Any notions I had of a consistent story about Jesus toppled out of the proverbial window, and it seemed I was starting over from scratch.

A good deal of inspiration came, however, with the study of Eastern religions, which attracted me then, as they do now. I found Hindu and Buddhist ideas appealing, especially as they seemed to inform my own Christian ideas in useful ways. At one point, I encountered Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of world myth. In the summer between my first and second years in college, I read *The Masks of God*, in four volumes, taking elaborate notes. In that majestic series, Campbell surveys mythology from pagan religions of the South Pacific and elsewhere to western and eastern religious ideas, as they unfolded in often similar patterns. He had himself been a student of Carl Jung, quite literally, and Jungian understandings of myth informed his thinking.

For all my interest in exotic religious practices and concepts, I was still drawn mainly to the Jesus story, and when I went abroad to Scotland, in the late sixties – I would spend seven years there in all -- I began to revisit my earlier notions of what Christianity meant, taking further courses in biblical studies at the University of St. Andrews. I began to attend a local Anglican church, and that has remained my religious base ever since.

My understanding of the essential story of the Jesus *mythos* deepened and shifted over the decades. Like anyone on a journey, I was often dismayed and confused, even terrified by the difficulty of getting a grasp of this material. But I always took comfort in a few impossibly beautiful and wise lines from T.S. Eliot’s “The Dry Salvages,” which is part of the *Four Quartets*. Eliot is talking about the difficult of religious understanding or apprehension:



But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint--
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.
For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation

I often think of the penultimate line here, where Eliot refers to “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action,” as crucial. These five words seemed to offer a way forward, a program of sorts. And I have attached myself to these words.

And yet the idea of writing a life of Jesus never occurred to me, even I continued to read and study a variety of theologians in different traditions. I never lost my interest in Eastern thought, in fact, and found a good deal to inspire me in works such as the *Tao Te Ching*, the great poetic inspiration of Taoism.

As I've often worked in the area of biographical fiction, the idea slowly dawned that I might try writing a novel about Jesus, and I made some effort to begin to understand the story in a more coherent way. This led me into re-reading various translations of the Gospels and, indeed, going back to them in Greek. I had always found the gnostic Gospel of Thomas alluring, and I began to study the gnostic gospels more widely, fascinated by what they suggest in various (often contradictory) ways about the life and meaning – the essential *kerygma* – or important meanings (as Bultmann would have it) of Jesus.

A great deal of new information had been coming our way for some decades about Second Temple Judaism, the period when Jesus lived in ancient Palestine – I'm thinking especially about the work of Geza Vermes and E.P. Sanders, with their understanding of Christianity as a reform effort within Judaism itself, a breakaway movement that took various things from the Pharisees and the Essenes. New information gleaned from archaeological digs



in the postwar era shifted our understanding of this crucial period in Jewish history, with fresh textual material coming in large tranches, beginning with the material from Nag Hammadi (1945) and the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late forties and early fifties – one can't overestimate the richness of these finds, which vastly enriched our trove of scriptural writings and sources. And the revelations just keep coming, with hardly a year passing without further textual evidence from the ancient world.

And so we know a lot more now about the times in which Jesus lived, and the century before him, than we ever did. And this information amplifies our understanding of his life and teaching. It gives us a context we never had before.

I was in the midst of doing this research for a novel about Jesus when a friend invited me to contribute a book to a series on iconic world figures. I immediately chose Jesus as my subject, as my work had already begun. In fact, I'd been getting ready to write this book without knowing it for much of my life. But the challenges of the subject were – to put it mildly -- daunting.

For starters, there was the mountain of scholarship, much of it difficult to absorb. I soon had countless books on my desk, and began a close study of the four canonical gospels. I dug into the history of the era, and consulted various friends who knew the landscape of biblical criticism and theology far better than I did.

Of course I knew the general outline of this material, and had read in the area for over four decades, just following my nose; but now I returned to the details of biblical scholarship with the kind of focus you acquire when a deadline looms. I found the gospel accounts of Jesus riveting as well as unsettling at times. These were narratives written any number of decades after Jesus, and they were drafted -- and probably revised and rewritten – by people who had never met their subject in person. They would have been drawing on accounts – mostly oral, some written -- carried by splinter groups of Jesus-followers in the decades after his crucifixion. I'll just point to one of the narrative strands that caught my attention, the Christmas story.

Every religion, every country, needs a myth of origins. The Romans had Romulus and Remus. In the U.S., we have several founding myths, such as story on which our Thanksgiving feast-day is based. It didn't in fact become a holiday until Abe Lincoln decided it might be a good thing to celebrate the notion of "coming together" during an especially fractious period of American history. The story associated with Thanksgiving has very little in the way of factual basis, by the way; it reaches back to a brief and ambiguous passage in Governor William Bradford's memoirs of the Plymouth Plantation. But the myth of Thanksgiving speaks to our need to draw together for mutual sustenance. The first settlers from Europe needed help from the native population, and they were pleasantly surprised now and then. The terrible hostilities would come a little while later.

But let's return to the Christmas story: it's fascinating that Mark, the earliest gospel, makes no mention of this. This gospel writer never heard of Mary and Joseph and their wanderings, the birth or residence in Bethlehem, the star,



the wise men, the flight to Egypt, and so forth. Later gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, had perhaps heard stories with aspects of the Christmas story that circulated among followers of the Way – as everyone referred to early Christianity.

Matthew's story is one of fear and flight, the massacre of innocent children by wicked King Herod, the miraculous escape of Jesus, Mary and Joseph to Egypt. No doubt Matthew spoke to a segment of the early Christian movement who felt threatened by the Romans: the walls of Jerusalem would soon come tumbling down in 70 ACE, as we know, and the Jews would be scattered, their Temple destroyed. And they certainly were familiar with stories of exile in Egypt – baby Jesus, in Egypt, has parallels with baby Moses, in fact – another infant threatened by the forces of history and in need of rescue.

In Luke, we get a very different Christmas story. It's softer and gentler, with shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. There is no mention of Herod or the massacre of innocent children – an event, by the way, with no historical basis. In this narrative, Jesus is taken on the eighth day to the Temple in Jerusalem for circumcision, as we read in Luke 2:21. This is wholly in keeping with Jewish tradition, and I myself prefer this version of Christmas, as it seems comforting and vivid as well. Luke is an incredibly good writer.

It's quite obvious that these stories don't match up. And -- just to make things difficult: in John's late, mystical gospel we get a more abstract notion of Jesus' origins: "In the beginning was the Word," etc. It's a powerful passage that is often read in churches on Christmas Eve. But the Greek philosophical idea of the *logos*, a hugely complex term that vaguely and inadequately translates as "understanding" or "controlling intellect" -- seems far removed from the manger in Bethlehem, the imagery of the wise men or magi coming from the East, the hovering star.

I turned to the word *mythos* for help in thinking about gospel narratives and the fact that they often seem contradictory or – more usefully – designed for specific audiences, crafted to tell a particular kind of story in particular historical circumstances. Myth and *mythos* are two related words. Each has multiple meanings and they aren't interchangeable. If you go around talking about Jesus as a myth, many devout Christians will raise their eyebrows. In ordinary parlance, when we say something is a myth, we mean it's untrue. But I was interested in myth as a story whose truth-function didn't necessarily coincide with the everyday world. So I reached for *mythos*, meaning a myth that speaks to larger truths, that doesn't depend on factuality in the same way that history does. As anyone who studies New Testament history will know, one can't treat the canonical gospels as "truth" in the same way that one, for example, one thinks a life of FDR or JFK. The authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were not writing modern scientific history.

Modern biblical scholarship has looked carefully and thoughtfully at this material. It begins in the late eighteenth century in Germany and extends through the productive textual studies of the Gospels in the nineteenth century. In the final chapter of my book, I survey the various attempts at trying to write a life of Jesus – a tradition that



culminated in Albert Schweitzer's famous *Quest of the Historical Jesus* in 1906. By the 1930s, however, major scholars like Bultmann had more or less given up the idea that one could know anything about Jesus whatsoever. In 1935, he wrote: "I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus."

The idea that one could know *something* of Jesus – the facts of his life and the circumstances of Second Temple Judaism – shifted in the forties and fifties quite dramatically. I began to think about Jesus not as historical fact – that's another matter – but as *mythos*, a story with deep meaning, a life pattern that could be understood and which, in forms of religious practice, acquires layers of meaning. Modern theologians often talk about "de-mythologizing" Jesus; but my effort – as I began to see – was to re-mythologize him, to see his life in a context that was, in many ways, beyond history.

I found this move into mythic narrative liberating. And it didn't mean, for me, that the Jesus story was somehow not "true." Quite the opposite. It meant that the story was more than true, that one didn't have to read this story in a literal fashion, as this would demean it, making it easily dismissible. I've always argued that atheists and literal Christians were in essence two sides of the same coin, unable or unwilling to read for symbol and metaphor, to understand – to believe – in mythical truth, which is (for me) what matters.

As I burrowed into the gospels, I found myself stumbling again and again on certain terms that were key words in my childhood and young adulthood. I'm thinking of words like "saved" or "salvation" or "repentance" or, indeed, "faith" and "belief." I listened to countless sermons by my father, and others, where the formula for Christian practice was quite simple: Repent from your sins, believe in Jesus, and you will be saved. As I worked on my book, I began to unpack some of these words, each of which bears a world of multiple meanings.

Repent is a fairly bad translation of the Greek term *metanoia* – a key word in the New Testament, often used by the gospels writers, with a somewhat shifting meaning. The word derives from *meta*, meaning "to move beyond," as in metaphysics, or "to grow large or increase." *Noia* means "mental" or "mind." So the word, at least on an imagistic and philological level, means: "to grow large in mind." When biblical writers suggest that one should "repent" in order to be "saved," this actually means one should "leap into the large mind of God." It does not necessarily mean to "repent" in the sense of saying you're awfully sorry that you behaved badly, although it might well include such thinking and the idea of reversing direction seems to have gathered around the term quite early. Even to be "saved" doesn't relate to "salvation" in the common modern use of that term: *soteria* in Greek is a complicated word that most essentially means "being filled with a new spirit."

Ideas of repentance and salvation reach back to the Church Fathers, especially Justin Martyr, who influenced Irenaeus and Tertullian, who added the strong element of penance to Christian thinking. St. Jerome, who translated the Bible from Greek into Latin in the late fourth century, absorbed this teaching, setting in motion a range of mistranslations and theological misperceptions by translating *metanoia* as *paenitentia*, which becomes, in English,



repent, as in “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2) And yet the term represents a beckoning by God, an invitation to spaciousness and spiritual awakening, and the tradition of penitence often seems to push against this. How about this for a translation: “Wake up to God. Enter his mind. The spaciousness of his kingdom lies inside you. Transformation is not only possible: it lies within your grasp.”

I was hardly the first person to think along these lines, of course. But in my work on Jesus I was putting bits and pieces of scholarship together in ways that offered – to me personally – a fresh way of thinking about my own faith.

Indeed, that word “faith,” as I began to realize, demands a bit of unpacking. Again, the problems seem to arise with the St. Jerome Latin translation of the Greek word *pistis*, which occurs 243 times in the New Testament, as *fides* in Latin or “faith” in English. *Pistis* means something like “trust in others.” Think of what it means to have trust, to put genuine trust in the workings of the spirit. “Faith,” on the other hand, is most commonly defined as “belief in something for which there is no proof” – that’s the Miriam-Webster definition. *Fides* is often associated, indeed, with the word “belief.” And this narrows the focus of Christian thinking in disturbing ways.

Belief, perhaps, can itself be opened up in fruitful ways. In its Greek as well as its Latin roots, the word “believe” simply means “giving one’s deepest self to” something. The Latin is *credo*: I believe. This derives from *cor do*: “I give my heart.” The English word “believe” connects, via root-meanings, to the Middle English *bileven*: “to hold dear.” And so to believe in Jesus means to hold him dearly, and to value his presence.

This isn’t just linguistic footwork. Christianity is – in part -- a textual religion, depending heavily on certain words, written in Hebrew and Greek, then translated, via Latin, into modern tongues. Delving into the meanings of key terms proved, at least for me, essential in re-thinking the story of Jesus, in figuring out a way of writing Jesus.

I met another huge challenge in trying to create a chronological narrative of the life of Jesus. The gospels are hardly straightforward life-and-times accounts. They are rhetorical texts – and rhetoric is the ancient art of persuasion. They were meant to collect the teachings of Jesus, which had been transmitted by word of mouth or, perhaps, by the circulation of collections of Jesus-sayings (the Gospel of Thomas is such a book, probably based on earlier anthologies of sayings by Jesus). The gospels are meant to valorize Jesus by associating him with certain well-known tropes in the Hebrew scriptures. They attempt to give us some knowledge of the character of Jesus: how he lived, treated his friends and disciples, his family. How he walked and talked, and where he walked and what he talked. And each of the four gospels drives toward the passion, the final days in Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified. And each gospel reflects, in different ways, on the meaning of his crucifixion and the nature of the resurrection.

If we only had the three synoptic gospels, retelling the story would be fairly easy. Okay, Mark didn’t know or care about Christmas. Mark didn’t dwell on much after the Crucifixion. Indeed, the oldest versions of the text of Mark don’t include Chapter 16: 9-20, where we get some post-Resurrection appearances, including the Great



Commission. This material was probably added later: a fair number of good textual scholars of the New Testament concur on this. But the overall picture of Jesus seems relatively consistent in Mark, Matthew and Luke, which are all based on now-lost primary material. Each of these quotes from the same lost text as well as material unique to each gospel writer.

In these synoptic gospels, Jesus teaches in parables. His ministry in Palestine lasts one year – these gospels agree on that. But John’s gospel introduces problems. John suggests that the ministry took three years. And Jesus seems like a very different person in John: he doesn’t teach in parables, not in the same way. He makes grand “I am” statements: “I am the X, Y, and Z.” There are seven of these, and they allude to Exodus 3:14, where God says to Moses: “I am who I am.” In Hebrew, this is: *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*, one of the seven names used for God in the Jewish scriptures. So when John has Jesus using these “I am” statements, he is essentially telling us things about God. God is the way, the truth, and the life. God is the bread of life. God is the light of the world. And so forth. Jesus, as the human face of God, identifies as the gate through which one gets into contact with God. This is made quite enigmatic, in a gorgeous philosophical manner, in John 8:58: “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I am.”

I can hardly write this without thinking of Wallace Stevens, the great American poet, and his “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” where he writes: “There is a month, a year, there is a time / In which majesty is a mirror of the self: / I have not but I am and as I am, I am.” Jesus seems, in the image of him that we find in John’s gospel, to have found a mirror of the self – the eternal self – in God, in the infinite “I am,” a sense of boundless being. Jesus has, in fact, modeled for us the opening of the mind into the larger mind of God

So the problem for any re-telling of the gospels is to reconcile the different versions of Jesus that unfold in these four narratives.

As a side-note, not unrelated, I would remind everyone that the gospels, although they appear in the New Testament, are not by chronology the first pieces of Christian writing. Paul’s letters were much earlier, written only twenty or thirty years after the Crucifixion, and it’s interesting to note that Paul seems to have almost no interest in the details of the life of Jesus. Indeed, he appears not ever to have heard about Christmas, about Mary and Joseph, about the Sermon on the Mount (though one hears distant echoes of it here and there). One can, however, assume that quite soon after Jesus left this earth, stories about him began to circulate among the various and often competing Christian communities that spread out from Jerusalem into Asia and toward Greece and Rome.

So my job in putting together a life of Jesus involved the work of reconciling accounts – or, at least, noting that in many ways one could not reconcile certain aspects of these accounts. That is usually the route I usually took, simply observing that it says one thing in Matthew and another in John, or noting that things like the Wedding at Cana and the raising of Lazarus appear only in John. And for his part, John seems not to know about the temptation of Jesus in the desert, the transfiguration, or many other crucial and theologically important moments in the story.



What conclusions did I draw from all of this? Was my faith, as they say, shaken? I think of that great line in T.S. Eliot's poem, *Gerontion* – “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”

In so many ways I can say I'm glad I did this book, and that it opened doors into many rooms that I continue to explore as I attempt to follow in the path that Jesus put forward.

One of the revelations, for me, was the centrality of the Sermon on the Mount, which is given its full expression in the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters of Matthew. It's often said that Matthew was compiled as a kind of textbook for an early seminary, possibly in Antioch, and it in its neatness and thoroughness it certainly feels like a textbook. Everything you need to know about the ethical teachings of Jesus – his key sayings, how he offers a new covenant that revises the original Hebrew covenant with God – is all here in neatly ordered form. Here you'll find the golden rule, as well many key sayings and parables.

As I worked, it struck me as important that Jesus lived on the Silk Road – that important trade route from East to West. He would have been in touch throughout his life with travelers from the East – from Persia and India, for instance – who brought with them ideas of karma. That one reaps what one sows is a piece of that teaching. But the larger idea of karmic reciprocity permeates the teachings of Jesus, and it's not surprising that he is considered by many in the East as a kindred spirit. From the West, especially Greece, Jesus absorbed ideas about body and soul – a Platonic notion that underlies much of Christian theology. Indeed, the hymn to *logos*, which opens the Gospel of John, owes a great deal to Plotinus and other writers in the Greek mystical tradition.

Let me say, at last, something about reading the Resurrection as *mythos*. Accounts of the Resurrection and later appearances by Jesus vary wildly from gospel to gospel, but it's clear in reading these narratives that the point is made again and again that nobody had a clear picture of Jesus when he returned.

In John, the story plays out in suspenseful detail as Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb by herself. To her amazement, she finds the stone rolled away. She enters the dark, heavily scented crypt, where she encounters two angels, who speak to her, and then a mysterious figure appears at her side. She doesn't recognize this person and assumes he's a gardener.

Jesus says a single word to her: “Mary.”

“*Rabboni!*” she cried. Her response -- in Aramaic -- means “teacher.” Now she knows who stands before her; but she didn't recognize him at first.

Almost nobody recognizes Jesus at first – a point of huge significance, which points to the difficult and mysterious



nature of the Resurrection, which defies ordinary thinking. The embodied spirit of the Messiah returning from the dead was not the same person who died but some altered version, transmogrified more than restored to his former state. There is an important and difficult teaching here: We should not expect to recognize Jesus at first, even as he awakens within us. Recognition takes time, a process of uncovering.

Jesus walks out of the tomb, appearing to various disciples and followers, and it's worth noting how often they seem puzzled by him. The story of the Road to Emmaus is typical. It appears in Luke 24: 13-32 and more briefly in Mark 16:12-13. It runs like this: Two followers of Jesus walk along a dusty road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They talk between themselves about the rumor that Jesus, their beloved rabbi, had awakened from the dead. As they converse, a third man appears beside them. "What are you talking about?" he wonders. They looked at him incredulously: "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened?"

They tell Jesus about this "prophet, powerful in word and deed," a man called Jesus of Nazareth, someone who enjoyed a special relationship with God. They tell him the story of the women who visited his tomb but did not find him there. They claim he has risen, though they seem not to know what to make of this information.

Jesus scolds them: "You are so foolish, and slow to believe everything the prophets have spoken!"

But even *this* rebuke fails to alert them to the identity of their companion, whom they invite to share their meal that evening. He sits with them, taking the bread in his hands, and gives thanks for it. We read in Luke: "And then their eyes were opened, and they saw who was before them." Somewhat bizarrely, as soon as they recognize their beloved rabbi, he disappears – *poof*. It's a strange but compelling story, suggesting that it's difficult to possess the vision, to retain it.

These are just two of the stories in the gospels where close friends and disciples fail to recognize the risen Jesus. In my book, I suggest there is a larger truth here. Jesus did not, like Lazarus, simply get up and walk out from the burial crypt and resume life in ordinary time. His Resurrection was not the Great Resuscitation. Jesus was otherworldly now, genuinely transmogrified, transfigured.

Let me conclude by saying that writing the life of Jesus had its many challenges – all of which I'm grateful for, in fact. In digging into the details, facing the problems, getting my head around the various issues that anyone interested in this great subject must address, I found myself leaning deeper and deeper into a sense of trust. I came to trust the *mythos*, the truth of the story more than the facts of the story. And while the facts of the story – including their contradictions -- can't help but fascinate us, it's the wider truth that matters. As Oscar Wilde once complained: "The English are always degrading their truths into facts." It strikes me that Christians often do the same thing, in ways that undermine the old, old story, in all its splendid radiance and complex truth.

