Philip Pullman’s Jesus and ‘Christ’—and God?

Robert Morgan
Linacre College, Oxford

Abstract
A story which dramatizes the distinction between the historical reality of Jesus and the ‘Christ of faith’ has given new life to a once powerful critique of Christian doctrine. Pullman’s alternative version of the gospel story can be countered by historical scholarship which shares his non-supernaturalist assumptions, but a theological response which communicates the Christian message of the gospels is also needed. The allegorical interpretation that Pullman’s fable invites allows a reading that is compatible with a rational form of traditional Christianity.

Keywords
Historical Jesus, Christ of faith, resurrection, apologetics, Reimarus, D.F. Strauss, Albert Schweitzer, Philip Pullman.

There are several reasons why many in the West today reject Christianity, including what they see of religious institutions, but the bottom line for some is simply that they think it is not true. The most obvious stumbling-block is how they understand Christian belief in God, whether that is crudely anthropomorphic or philosophically sophisticated. Philosophers of religion have been more successful here than in what they have written about Jesus and his resurrection. Philip Pullman’s entertaining and deadly serious ‘STORY’ (emphasis on the dust-jacket) of Jesus, the origins of belief in his resurrection, and the composition and content of the gospel tradition in The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ (Canongate 2010) offers more to Christian education and apologetics than one might have expected.

It was widely reviewed in the popular press and discussed on-line on account of the author’s prestige and well-known hostility to organized religion. It received less attention in the religious press, perhaps because its fictional form seemed to pose no threat to Christian belief, or could be countered by claiming (what no-one disputes) that the gospels contain more history than this fable.¹ But that underestimated its attractive echo of one of the main reasons for the cultural eclipse of Christianity: the incredibility (for many) of accounts or pictures of Jesus which overshadow his true humanity with claims to divinity.

¹ Notably Gerald O’Collins S.J. Philip Pullman’s Jesus (London: DLT 2010).
Over 200-odd years that reaction against the churches’ christological dogma has been answered by theologians in two new ways beyond repeating valued traditions: (1) by reducing christology to human proportions, dispensing with most Christian doctrines, or (2) by restating these in the light of modern thought, including credible historical accounts of Jesus and Christian origins.

The historical truth contained in the former slowly became part of the latter, but the rationalist break with the New Testament witness gained a life of its own inside and outside religious circles. This explains why Pullman’s work, reissued now in paperback (2017), confirmed some in their unbelief and could also disturb believers aware of the challenges that modern historical study have presented to traditional Christianity but not sure how these have been answered. Pullman’s fiction or faction raises a lid on issues long settled for some Western theology and biblical scholarship but far from fully assimilated. Its fresh take on the citadel of Christian faith shows how insecure some of the ramparts appear to many inside and outside alike. The necessary theological adjustments have been partly absorbed in churches but have made less impact on the wider culture. Pullman’s novella (under 40,000 words) offers believers a platform for confronting some of their own questions and also talking about Jesus and resurrection faith with unbelievers. Its fictions may promote the modern historical study of a Christianity still totally committed to the gospels’ witness to the revelation of God in the life, death and resurrection or exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth.

Instead of defending the historicity of the gospels indiscriminately, or ignoring or dismissing Pullman’s fiction as obviously untrue, some Christians recognized that this alternative version of the gospel story reflects what biblical scholarship has long accepted: that the gospels contain historical information about both Jesus himself and the early church’s evaluation of him. That vindicated what was right (while correcting what was wrong) in the epoch-making historical research of Reimarus and the more influential 1835 Life of Jesus by David Friedrich Strauss. It did not prevent theologians committed to both the historical truth about Jesus so far as this can be known, and to the interpretations of his religious significance contained in the New Testament and beyond, from showing how these are related. Like the gospels themselves, most Christianity holds the history and the theology together in faith-images of Jesus, and now sees no objection to historians distinguishing them. Mainstream christology incorporates historical Jesus research into its Christian accounts of Jesus as the saving revelation of God but (unlike Strauss) has resisted making the historians’ distinction into the separation of Jesus and Christ expressed in Pullman’s title and dramatized by his story.

Before theology adjusted to the truth contained in modern historical study it was thought necessary to choose between the gospels’ supernaturalist presentations of Jesus and non-supernaturalist alternatives that with claimed reason to be more historical. Most believers then sided with the gospels, even if they suspected that some of what is reported may not be historical. Others found non-supernaturalist accounts of Jesus, including fictional ones, more credible than the gospels, because they reflect the modern assumptions which are also taken for granted in critical historical reconstructions.

---

2 C.H. Talbert ed. Reimarus: Fragments (London: SCM Press, 1971) German 1778. See also the commemorative issue of Expository Times 129.6 (March 2018).

3 George Eliot’s 1846 English translation has been edited and introduced by Peter Hodgson The Life of Jesus Critically Examined (London: SCM Press, 1973). See also R. Morgan with J. Barton Biblical Interpretation (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 44-57, and article ‘Christ’, The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought (2017) 591-609.

4 Albert Schweitzer The Quest of the Historical Jesus (1906) (Eng. London: A & C Black 1910) and (2nd enlarged edition, London: SCM Press 2000) makes this the first of his three great alternatives structuring his account of modern (Reimarus to Wrede and himself) Jesus research.
A faith which suspends rational historical judgment can still read the gospels through the supernatualist lens fractured by Strauss and set aside by most historians. Those who by contrast incorporate some modern historical conclusions in their faith-pictures of Jesus may do so consciously or unconsciously. Hearing or reading the gospels they do not have to distinguish between what probably happened and what are later embellishments expressing post-resurrection perspectives because their faith-images of the risen Lord already include some historical truth about Jesus. Those who believe that the risen Lord Jesus and Jesus of Nazareth are one and the same person (in different ‘states’) can share the gospels’ fusion of history and faith, and not be surprised by the mixture of history, theology, poetry, myth and legend in these texts. Their witness to God’s truth contains plenty of history, but also much that is not history, expressed in various ways. The disciples combined historical memory and their subsequent experience of Jesus. They used the available language of resurrection, exaltation and glorification to understand and express their conviction that God had vindicated Jesus following his crucifixion. Acceptance of that inaccessible event or mystery is still definitive for traditional, though not all, Christianity. The reasons for accepting it today, however, are complex. They have more to do with trusting tradition and living experience than historical argument.

Accepting and treasuring the gospels, however, leads some Christians to assume they must accept as history some details which they find incredible. Discovering what these details mean, and that the truth of the gospel depends on only a few now scarcely disputed historical judgments, has been liberating, but such distinctions have sometimes also seemed to undermine the authority of scripture. Pullman’s fiction invites thought about how far the Christian claim that God raised Jesus requires the historicity of the gospels and other traditions about the disciples coming to believe it. How far is the truth of the theological (about God) claim dependent on historical evidence? What historical minimum is essential to faith and why? It will include matters that cannot be proved but are overwhelmingly probably (Jesus’ intimate relationship with his God and sense of his mission), but the truth of the gospel requires more than this. A Christian interpretation of Pullman’s story might turn an opponent’s potentially damaging weapon into a medium for Christian teaching about Jesus and the gospels’ witness to this crucified and risen Lord.

***

Its fictional account of Jesus is selective, but includes all the salient points of the (composite) gospel story and nearly all its historical characters. It elaborates imaginatively, making additions and alterations at will, while following the synoptic outline with a few Johannine additions. From birth narratives to burial these familiar historical figures become characters in Pullman’s story mostly by being reported on by his main character, Jesus’ fictional twin brother called ‘Christ’ who has a reliable informant in the inner group of disciples. That indirectness recalls Gerd Theissen’s historically convincing Jesus in The Shadow of the Galilean (1985), who is also seen through the eyes of a fictional reporter but Pullman makes no claim to historicity and, unlike Theissen’s spy Andreas, his ‘Christ’ has a secondary meaning hinted at by his christological name. In elaborating the history to make it even more memorable and meaningful ‘Christ’ begins at the baptism of Jesus to re-imagine what he observes and after his death identifies with what he has, guided by a mysterious ‘stranger’, constructed: the early church’s view of Jesus, the risen Lord Jesus Christ. This mixture of historical memory, imaginative embellishment, rational commonsense, and, through the decisive input of the mysterious ‘stranger’, theological interpretation, is a Christ of faith. Pullman, like Strauss whom he had read, separates the unhistorical gospel material assigned to his ‘Christ’ from Jesus the historical figure – contrary to most
Christian faith and theology which accepts it as true interpretation of Jesus and therefore part of his reality and truth. Pullman’s second fictional character, the unnamed stranger, also has a hidden meaning, and here too a positive evaluation of him is key to Christian interpretation of the story, but unlike the plainly human ‘Christ’ he is shadowy, and unfleshed-out, ‘unlike anyone he had ever come across’ (p.100).

Most of the narrative and sayings of Pullman’s Jesus paraphrase the gospels and interpret them rationally, except where his intimate prayer to God in Gethsemane meets God’s silence with an apparent loss of faith. That soliloquy with its echo of Nietzsche’s ‘death of God’ contradicts what most Christians assume (but cannot prove) about how Jesus faced his death. Pullman’s fiction does not need support (e.g. from the cry of dereliction at Mark 15.34). Even historical constructions of Jesus contain more of their authors’ own beliefs than is usually admitted, and Pullman, like the Fourth Evangelist, is entitled to his own voice in this composition of a long final prayer for Jesus. Unlike John 17 it is not Christian theology, but it is religious, and many Christians will agree with Pullman’s Jesus that any church set up in your (sc. God’s) name should remain poor, and powerless, and modest. That it should wield no authority except that of love. That it should never cast anyone out . . . (p.199).

Despite its fictional elements this Jesus, like the gospels’, is identifiably the man from Nazareth. He is not the evangelists’ Jesus Christ of faith and history, but a version of the modern historians’ Jesus, roughly Albert Schweitzer’s heroic but deluded fanatic. Nearly everything this Jesus says rings true, though calling Gentiles ‘dogs’ was unfortunate (p.123, cf. p.92, Mark 7:27), and expecting the Kingdom to come on earth soon was a mistake or is in need of a different emphasis (p.122). Those who think Schweitzer was right about two big things (Jesus was a Jew and his Jewish eschatology was constitutive of his mission and message) but wrong about much else, can like Pullman make the necessary deletions and not consider more recent hypothetical constructions of what kind of Judaism Jesus represented or developed. What exactly Jesus expected that God would shortly do is far from clear but Pullman gives a better sketch of Jesus’ moral teachings than Schweitzer.5

For Jesus ‘the real meaning of things is that God loves us like a father, and his Kingdom is coming soon’ (p.42). Pullman presumably endorses the view of both his fictional protagonists that this historical Jesus loved the people without illusion, and that ‘his love is the most precious thing imaginable’ (p.240) and must be preserved uncorrupted by the church (p.241). He may even half-agree with the stranger who sees in Jesus ‘the miracle (that) will never be forgotten, its goodness will never be exhausted, its truth will last from generation to generation’ (p.224).

This Jesus is the historical figure, or rather one of the many possible historical reconstructions of Jesus. Pullman’s ‘Christ’ and his stranger, by contrast, are fictional characters superimposed on his version of the gospel story to frame and interpret that within a new story. Like some other fictional and historical retellings, this not only contradicts or reinterprets several details in the gospels, but (more radically) quietly subverts their message by hardening the historians’ distinction between their christological ideas and the historical figure of Jesus into a permanent separation. Having separated Jesus from the gospels’ interpretation of him the early Strauss preferred the latter. Its idea of the unity of the divine and the human expressed by the early church in the form of myth could be given a modern interpretation. Later liberals, like the older rationalists, accepted the separation but preferred the history. Pullman’s story also drives a wedge between Jesus and christology.

5 Schweitzer’s life of discipleship was a better interpretation of Jesus’ moral teaching than his theory of an interim ethic necessitated by the apocalyptic scenario that he attributed to his hero.
Putting these together again has involved suggesting how the christological interpretations of Jesus developed, and arguing that this historical development was justified. But that depends on the disciples being right about the resurrection. Pullman’s account of this development perhaps implies they were wrong about that, as Reimarus thought. Or perhaps (unlike Reimarus) his ambiguous narrative leaves that decisive question open, as will be suggested below.

Readers can ignore the secondary meanings of Pullman’s two fictional characters and simply enjoy the story. A deeper (allegorical) interpretation must distinguish between how these are identified, where everyone can agree, and how they are evaluated, where Christian and non-Christian readers will disagree. The latter will reflect readers’ pre-judgment about the resurrection faith that those two characters elicit: whether it is truth or an illusion persuading gullible disciples that the cross was not the end of Jesus. Was he a failed Messiah whose vision died with him (p.242) or is he a living Lord, God from God (p.58 etc.).

The theological content that ‘Christ’ represents, his secondary meaning beyond the narrative character, is revealed in what the mysterious stranger tells him. In echoes of Johannine christology, given a gnostic twist by the separation of Jesus and ‘Christ’, he tells him that Jesus ‘is a man and only a man, but you are the word of God’ (p.58). His writings will add ‘to the outward and visible events their inward and spiritual significance’, retelling the story from the perspective of God’s view of time which allows post-resurrection knowledge into the gospels’ history of Jesus (pp.124f.). ‘And he is the history and you are the truth . . . You will have to step outside time . . .’ (p.125). ‘Christ’ represents and will, as ‘the missing part of Jesus’ (p.225) ‘embody’ the stranger’s theological interpretation of the historical Jesus. This interpretation echoes the New Testament, especially John: that Jesus is ‘a man who is both a man and more than a man, a man who is also God and the word of God, a man who dies and is brought to life again’ (p.172).

The fallible human ‘Christ’ character anticipates the fallible human institution (the church) which will fulfil the stranger’s plan for the world by spreading the truth of Jesus through the christology that (as the stranger intends) he comes to embody. The strength of Pullman’s critique of Christianity lies not only in its historical understanding of the gospels, but also in its fairness and appreciation for the good in what it nevertheless insinuates is not true. Even the ‘scoundrel’ in its title is not malicious. ‘Christ’ is inept but serious. He sounds at times like Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, justifying the church’s Christianity in terms of the human weakness and need that he himself exemplifies, but that contains truth too. His suggestions to Jesus in the wilderness, understood by the author, readers and Jesus himself as temptations, are well-meant, and Pullman naturally finds ‘Christ’s’ literary ambitions congenial.

He had qualms about following the stranger’s instructions to facilitate Jesus’ arrest, but he obeys orders. The empty tomb and appearances which led to the resurrection faith of the disciples and subsequent church were engineered by the stranger, the mysterious hero or villain of the whole story whose identity is key to interpreting it and deciding to accept or reject him. ‘Christ’ is a realist and can compromise, in contrast to Jesus’ idealism and absolute integrity. He comes off morally second-best to Jesus, but he is not a bad man.6 His vision for the church (pp.42-4) is not that of Jesus, but purified and developed doctrinally by the stranger it will lead to all that is good (pp.171-4) in subsequent Christianity. Pullman’s Jesus sees there will also be much that is bad in it (pp.44, 196-9), and Christian readers can agree, but they can also identify with ‘Christ’ (the church theologian) in penitence and faith

6 Nicholas Tucker in The Independent, 18 April 2010, considered him, like Jesus, ‘virtually blameless’.
as he acknowledges ‘that we’ll get some things wrong to start with’ – and always – but still begs Jesus, ‘Won’t you come and help get them right? There’s no one alive (sic) who could guide us better than you . . . ’ (p.45).

‘Christ’ develops and then embodies (pp.225-38) the early church’s interpretation of the ministry, death and resurrection, ensuring the survival of an institution that will preserve the memory of Jesus and extend it to Gentiles (pp.41, 122f.), and mediate the consolations of religion (pp.170-74). The omniscient stranger makes clear to him that the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed will not come as Jesus perhaps expected. It is not of this world. Like John 18:36 the stranger knows more than the historical Jesus (cf. pp.125,170). But God wants the church to reflect the Kingdom (p.171), and lead people to it (p.172), and this will happen through the stranger’s own resurrection work in which ‘Christ’ (the church’s obedient trust and christological thinking) plays a part, placing at the centre of the church’s proclamation ‘the ever-living presence of a man . . . who is brought to life again . . . I told you how truth is not history, and comes from outside time . . . ’ (pp.172f.). This resurrection event can only be believed: ‘Yes, it will happen, if you believe it’ (p.173). Another ambiguity.

The ecclesial and christological identity of ‘Christ’, reflecting the post-resurrection layers in the gospel tradition, was missed by readers who thought that ‘Christ’ is Satan, because he tempts Jesus in the wilderness, or Judas Iscariot, because he betrays Jesus with a kiss in the garden. Milton’s Satan and modern Iscariots have their supporters, and these identifications of ‘Christ’ contain some truth because the church’s interpretations of Jesus have sometimes been diabolical, betraying their master, but the allegorical identity of ‘Christ’ seems clear, as is his well-intentioned but problematic relationship to Jesus. The latter rejects the tempting vision of a triumphalist church (pp.44, 199) and despises the corruptions that success will bring with it (p.43). Christians can agree about his flaws but may also accept the stranger’s verdict that, at a deeper level, he is right (p.170) and ‘the perfect chronicler of these events’ (p.124). But that consent depends firstly on identifying the stranger, and then accepting his reality and reliability and truthfulness, which the author finally does not.

As the thinking church and its christological thought ‘Christ’ is the obedient human instrument of the stranger. His literary project, encouraged or inspired by the stranger, will lead to the gospels and establish the church that will preserve the memory and continue the work of Jesus after his death. He is prepared to compromise and garnish the historical truth about Jesus in pursuit of that aim. When he is led by the stranger to facilitate the arrest of Jesus, not yet realizing it would lead to the crucifixion, like the first disciples who became the nucleus of the church he understood neither its divine necessity, nor the resurrection that would follow (cf. Mark 8:32; 9:10, 32-45; 14:18-21). He had to be instructed by the stranger about both, and about the coming spirit and the fallible future church as the one sure way to reach the Kingdom (pp.171-2) provided that in its faith and theology the separation of Jesus and Christ is overcome.

***

The truth of what ‘Christ’ embodies (christology) is contested, unproven (pp.171-5, 224-8) and finally rejected by the author (pp.239-44). But Pullman makes room for readers to take a different view. The truth of ‘Christ’ depends on the identity, reality and truthfulness of the mysterious stranger. His (secondary) identity is no problem. Everything about him points to the Jewish and Christian idea of God. It is only the reality or evaluation of this idea that is at issue between Pullman and his Christian readers. As with their conflicting evaluations of ‘Christ’ the author is so fair to Christian doctrine that one could be excused for thinking he almost wishes it were true, like Thomas Hardy in ‘The Oxen’. Robert Browning in ‘Bishop Blougram’s Apology’ gives Schleiermacher’s ‘cultured despisers’ a point to ponder:
It may be false but will you wish it true?
Has it your vote to be so if it can?

Pullman’s art as a story-teller allows his readers their freedom.

The divine identity of the unnamed stranger slowly dawns on ‘Christ’. He concludes that he is ‘not a human being at all. He could only be an angel’ (p.126), and not Satan (p.223) but a good angel, the messenger of God who in the Old Testament may be God taking human form to communicate with humans (p.167, cf. Gen. 16:7-13; 31:11-13; Exod. 3:2-6 etc.). A play on the ‘man’ who will not give his name but is identified as God in Gen. 32:24-32 is surely intended, and possibly also Exod. 3:14 where God is not named until 6:3. He depends on human co-operation to do his (‘our’) work.

He never lies, but like the Delphic oracle he can be misunderstood. His enigmatic promise that Jesus ‘will be risen’ (p.226) sounds inauthentic to the fallible human ‘Christ’. Some in the early church and beyond held a resurrection-type view of resurrection (cf. Dan. 12:1-2). But the reader has been led to trust the stranger more than ‘Christ’. Readers who partly agree with the stranger about faith and history may welcome his refusal to reduce the resurrection to the observable history that the empty tomb might suggest. Pullman’s fiction about how the tomb came to be empty can be read either as a denial of the resurrection or as a warning against basing belief in it on the historicity of the tomb which is uncertain and open to different explanations.

The disagreement between a Christian and an atheist reading of Pullman’s fable hinges on conflicting evaluations of both the stranger and ‘Christ’. The a christological interpretation of Jesus as Christ is not undermined by Pullman’s story. Fables can contain truth. Readers’ decisions for or against how ‘Christ’ elaborates the historical truth about Jesus, however, ties into their estimate of the stranger who in the story converses with ‘Christ’. In the allegory this is presumably God directing the mind of the early church. But is this omniscient being real, or is he a projection of believers’ hopes and fears?

Is he a malevolent power in the depths of the human psyche or an intuition about the true nature of things, expressing the loving purposes of God? Does he lead ‘Christ’ (the theologizing church) into all truth – or astray? Pullman allows his readers to see his fictitious stranger as a confidence trickster and disappearing Cheshire cat or as an anthropomorphic symbol representing ultimate truth: the Christian construction of God whose reality is more than can be spoken of analogically or pictorially.

On his first appearance, (p.58) the stranger validates ‘Christ’s’ (the early church or evangelists’) christological interpretation of Jesus’ baptism (cf. p.124), and in a revealing displacement on p.125 he is experienced by ‘Christ’ (the church) in a dream or vision as transfigured. Pullman’s Jesus does not appear here. This is post-resurrection interpretation of Jesus. Christians may agree, but like the gospels they relate it to the historical figure Jesus and accept the reality of the God identified in Pullman’s story.

On p.58 – the most strongly Johannine page – the stranger associates himself with the church’s later christological vocabulary and promises to ‘come to you again’ (cf. John 14:28; 16:16-19). God and the risen Christ are united in what comes close to Christian doctrine. When on p.235 the risen Christ at Emmaus defines himself as the Johannine Logos who now ‘must return to my father, who is in heaven’, having ‘existed before time . . . in the beginning with God’, and having come so that you (disciples) ‘should see the light and the truth, and testify to them’, and having instituted a remembrance ritual, this Jesus-Christ echoes the stranger’s explanation on p.58. It is plain that the stranger is behind the whole operation. But was the whole operation a charade or very truth? That question is posed by Pullman’s story of the genesis of resurrection faith. Answers depend on readers’ evaluation of the stranger. Does this idea of God correspond to reality or is God an illusion?

Christian readers who believe that Jesus is the risen Jesus Christ need not see the resurrection
appearances of ‘Christ’ in the story as the deceptions that most readers have assumed Pullman intends. They need not be false impersonations of Jesus by his (identical) twin brother. The story allows the reader to believe at this point, i.e. until the last chapter, that the dead Jesus has become the risen Christ, that his resurrection is real, as perhaps signalled on p.125: ‘You will have to step outside time’ (cf. p.225 on ‘Christ’ embodying a truth unknown to the historical Jesus, and becoming ‘the missing part of Jesus’). A transition of Jesus after his death to be risen Lord and Christ is expressed at Acts 2:36 and in different terms (from son of David to Son of God) at Rom. 1:3-4, and (from the form of a servant to super-exalted Lord) at Phil. 2:7-11 etc. The assumption (against Pullman) that the same Jesus Christ is spoken of in both ‘states’ is a possible reading of pp.231-8, and was preserved in several liberal attempts to remain orthodox while describing historically the birth of resurrection belief.7

Although Pullman himself rejects it, his story leaves room for a modern trust in God, based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It hints at a philosophical alternative to empiricism, and a Hegelian version of Christianity rooted in history with the resurrection of Jesus its pivot.8 The truth of this divine event is not available to inspection. The emergence of resurrection faith can be investigated by historians who may be Christian or anti-Christian apologists, or impartial, but the contested resurrection event itself can only be a mystery, an act of God that can only be believed (p.173). The author’s known views have led most readers to see only mockery in the stranger’s gnomic statements about history and faith, but some theologians see them as defensible. They can share Pullman’s criticisms of the church attributed here to his Jesus and acknowledged by ‘Christ’ and the stranger, and can accept several of the historical judgments behind Pullman’s story, without doubting that the one true God was, is, and will be reconciling the world in and through the life and death of Jesus vindicated in or by Spirit (1 Tim. 3:16). As life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45) this Jesus Christ belongs with and in the Triune God according to the faith that sees in him the decisive revelation of God. That the apparently trustworthy stranger (who directs the ‘Christ’ character with a view to the future church while respecting his freedom) represents the ultimate transcendent reality that is reliable and true (Rom. 3:3-5) rather than an illusion leading religious thinkers astray, is the narrative possibility which allows a Christian theological interpretation of the story alongside the atheistic option.

Pullman’s account of the empty tomb, however, puts a Christian reading of his story under some strain – as the Annunciation story told as a seduction does not. Origen did not take seriously the unsubstantiated second-century story that the virgin Mary was made pregnant by a Roman soldier called Panthera, and Protestants short of mariological sensitivities may find Pullman’s story of the innocent Mary’s naiveté harmless, and the idea that she was a victim quite edifying. Although the ‘virgin birth’ found its way into the creeds and is for many an article of faith, treating it as history or biology seems to other believers optional. Matthew provides some grounds for historical scepticism both here and at the tomb without that weakening his testimony to the Incarnation or the Resurrection.9

A possibly fraudulent resurrection would be quite another matter. Many who doubt the historicity of the miraculous conception and

---

7 E.g. Peter Gant Seeing Light. A Critical Enquiry into the Origins of Resurrection Faith (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2019).

8 F.C. Baur’s brief discussions re-edited by Peter Hodgson remain exemplary. See Lectures on New Testament Theology. (Oxford: OUP, 2016) 152f., Christianity and the Christian Church of the First Three Centuries. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019) 37f. See also N. Smart et al. Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West (Cambridge: CUP, 1985) vol.1, 215-89; Peter Hodgson The Formation of Historical Theology (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 116-21, 235-37.

9 See A. Lincoln Born of a Virgin? (London: SPCK, 2013) for an outstanding treatment of the exegetical theological and hermeneutical issues.
the guard at the tomb insist (with the New Testament writers) that the truth of Christianity stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus and that belief in the Incarnation of God in Christ depends on that Easter event. Believing that ‘the Word became flesh’ i.e. that Jesus was and is the revelation of God, need not depend on a Lukan and perhaps Johannine physicality of the appearances, but it does depend on accepting by faith (pp.173, 235) a mysterious event that touched history but is beyond historiography: the event of God vindicating Jesus following his death.

Pullman’s imaginary account of what happened in the garden (pp.225f.) can be neutralized, as Reimarus was refuted, by better history. It is hard to see how historical arguments could verify a divine event but they can show when naturalistic explanations are mere speculation. This surprising brief nod to Reimarus (Strauss\(^\text{10}\) would have served him better) here can also be resisted on literary grounds by immanent criticism. It weakens the stranger’s repeated insistence that religious truth is more than history. He has already corrected ‘Christ’s’ childish plea that ‘it’s in history that I want to see him rise again’ (p.173).

Pullman improves on Reimarus’ hypothesis by making the disciples innocent and dropping Matthew’s guard at the tomb, but other ‘figures’ are involved (p.226). Neither ‘Christ’ nor readers are told who these ‘figures’ are or what exactly they remove from the tomb. Only the stranger (God) knows the details of the resurrection event. It is a mystery wholly different from the healings of Jesus in his ministry which ‘Christ’ writes up as miracles. The evangelists and most later Christians interpreted these as divine interventions, and some rationalist Christians (and others) as natural events. Others, following D.F. Strauss, see the stories as myth. The resurrection/exaltation of Jesus, like its extension into language of Incarnation, belongs in a different category as the mystery foundational to Christian faith. How much history the stories associated with them contain is a secondary matter, though the empty tomb is much better attested (whatever its explanation) than the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke.

In Pullman’s story ‘Christ’ (the church’s faith) never finds out who moved the stone, or what happened to the body. Readers who accept the reality of the stranger as God may imagine that as God’s agents the ‘figures’ were angels, others (if the omniscient stranger is a fraud or an illusion) that the figures are his human agents. The gospel story of the empty tomb is more helpful in proclaiming the resurrection event than explaining the truth of resurrection faith. It is surely theologically appropriate (God’s saving act embraces the material world) and implied by the Jewish language of resurrection, but it is the identity of the Risen One who appears to the disciples that matters. The stranger orchestrates belief in Jesus’ resurrection (pp.225-38). Whether that is true to the mystery of God depends on whether God whom the stranger represents is real or a wish-fulfilling illusion.

The Lukan and perhaps Johannine physicality of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ has led some to think in terms of resuscitation, others to suggest that Jesus never died. The story of the burial (cf. 1 Cor. 15:4) intends to exclude the latter. Pullman allows his readers to imagine either a mysterious attachment and so identification of ‘Christ’ (christology) with Jesus or a pretence. His garden scene shows how whatever their historicity these gospel narratives can stimulate both a believing and an unbelieving imagination. The appearances and experiences of the Spirit give a stronger historical basis for non-supernaturalist explanations of the emergence of resurrection faith than the empty tomb stories.

Those who deny the reality of God may pity ‘Christ’ and Jesus as victims of illusion or trickery, but must judge the stranger figure more harshly as the father of lies who lied about not being Satan (p.223). The text does not encourage that negative interpretation. Pullman’s stories of

\(^{10}\) Strauss 1973, 709-49. On p.739 he refutes Reimarus and on pp.740-44 defends the subjective ‘psychological explanation of the appearances of Jesus.’
The Expository Times 132(8)

the empty tomb and the appearances are ambiguous but can offer religious faith a warning against over-dependence on historical evidence, essential though its historical component is. If there is no transcendent reality at work in the resurrection of Jesus the disciples were duped, perhaps by their hopes or hallucinations. For those who accept God in Christ, on the other hand, and identify Jesus and the risen Christ, Pullman’s fable may express their faith in pictorial form. The stranger’s allusive references to the Akedah (Gen. 22) on pp.175, 224 allow readers to see the sacrificial ram as the lamb of God in his story of ‘the great oblation’ (p.224), and those who believe Jesus was ‘raised’ to be with God and in God and into their symbolic world or ‘into the kerygma’ can read the appearances of Christ after the death of Jesus in that light.

The author takes a different view and stacks the deck accordingly in his final chapter. As Pullman’s Jesus has lost his faith in the Gethsemane chapter, so ‘Christ’ too must be disillusioned. But both argue with God in prayer (Jesus) , or in a final conversation with the stranger. ‘Christ’ knows the historical reality of Jesus intimately and has worked it up into the Christian story, at first encouraged and then directed by the stranger, i.e. inspired by God (or a chimera). But he is finally sick of the ambiguities and compromises of religion and has apparently given up on their project. This ‘Christ’, now a lapsed theologian, thinks he was ‘deluded’ about God and ends up like Voltaire’s Candide, cultivating his garden or mending his nets. But still he is not quite certain ‘what I should do’ (p.245). Martha’s advice to get on with his life is healthy, but the now absent God (p.243) who has left the Jesus phenomenon in the hands of Pullman’s ‘Christ’, i.e. the church, has the last laugh: the bread has all gone, and the wine-jar is empty. The unbeliever is left hungry. Whether the stranger God gives up on the unbelieving theologian (‘I shall not come to you again’, p.243, contrast p.58) is left open. He has other options. When one feeble evangelist gives up, others will continue his work: ‘the story will be told many times’, says the omniscient stranger. ‘We shall make sure of that. In the years to come we shall sort out the helpful versions from the unhelpful’ (p.231).

God will guide the process of canon-formation. The disillusioned theologian thinks it ‘a tragedy’ that Jesus’ ‘vision could never come to pass; and the vision that will come to pass is not his’ (p.242). It is the stranger’s vision that will shape the future, including his final question, ‘which is better . . . to aim for absolute purity and fail altogether, or to compromise and succeed a little?’ (p.242). The stranger represents God whose worship Jesus tells ‘Christ’ is ‘the only task you need to think about’ (p.45). He is even wiser (p.170), and has a larger vision than the prophet Jesus who was made ‘memorable’ by ‘Christ’s’ making ‘the child born in the stable . . not just a human child, but the very incarnation of God himself’ (p.243).

Both story-telling and theological reflection continue. Christians today need not agree with Pullman’s pre-modern theologian ‘Christ’ that Jesus would not have recognized the stranger’s sort of truth (p.224), ‘letting truth into the history’. They may be more sympathetic to Platonism and Hegel than Pullman’s Jesus, accepting that first-century Jews understood the world differently from 21st-century Western Christians. They can welcome Pullman’s criticism of the church’s failures and cynicism (p.45) because they make Jesus, not the church, their ideal, distinguishing between the church and the Kingdom, as both the stranger (pp.170-2) and Jesus himself (pp.196-7) do.

Jesus speaks of the ‘sickness and shame’ that will grip the church (‘Christ’) when it remembers his passion, moral sense and purity (pp. 44f., cf. p.242). It does. But the church remembers this moral perfection as the stranger God intended, through ‘Christ’s’ Christian gospel story, which includes the christology which grew out of the history of Jesus and the stranger’s mysterious work of resurrection. In accepting that story and that work Christian readers may feel some solidarity with the rather English ‘Christ’ shamed by Jesus for trying to
make him more acceptable: ‘I’m sorry you see it like that . . . But I wish you’d let me persuade you otherwise’ (p.44). Dostoevsky’s Jesus kissed the realistic Grand Inquisitioner who accepted his own and humanity’s limitations.

There are many fictional lives of Jesus and several historical constructions of the birth of Christianity. Pullman’s historical Jesus is attractive as far as it goes. His fiction about the origins of the gospel tradition and belief in the resurrection contains more historical substrate than some Christian apologists have recognized (n.1). A few who do not share his standpoint may learn something about their own faith by reading his subtle attempt to subvert it. Whether Pullman’s stranger God is real or no more than a fiction the author leaves his readers to decide. Let the reader understand.