CHAPTER EIGHT

HISTORIA AND FABULA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

I

Limiting the Sway of Divine Inspiration

In New Testament studies the problem of fact versus fiction failed to gain prominence during the Early Modern Age. The short chapter we shall devote to the New Testament can, however, serve two purposes. The following survey will take us across the threshold of the nineteenth century and so prepare for the final sections of this study. The second, more important reason is that it will invite manifold comparison with our preceding examinations of Old Testament scholarship and the debate on early Rome. Thus it will point the way to some general conclusions on the progress of historia and fabula.

Formidable obstacles had to be overcome before a theory of myth could be applied to the Gospel. Troubling thoughts would have to invade the very centre of the Christian faith. When finally the notion of myth was introduced to the New Testament, it was done with both a thoroughness and a poignancy unparalleled in the texts we have examined in the two preceding chapters. The citadel was under assault. The shining knight in this amazing challenge — or to many the preposterous villain — was David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74). Among the many merits of his Leben Jesu (1835-36) was an awareness of the connection between ancient pagan philosophy and the beginnings of critical Bible exegesis. Strauss took comfort from the conclusion that the veracity of the Gospel was inevitably subject to critical testing. The events it narrated had been questioned right from the beginning. Indeed, they needed to be questioned in the same way as the tenets of pagan religions. The same mental attitude that had led Plato to question the Homeric deities\(^1\) and Euhemerus to reduce them to human status induced the pagan Celsus to challenge Christianity.

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\(^1\) Plato, Republic 2.377f.
Origen, the Greek Father, saw this clearly. In *Contra Celsum* he wrote a passage which is quoted by Strauss in extenso:

An attempt to substantiate almost any story as historical fact ... is one of the most difficult tasks and in some cases is impossible. Suppose, for example, that someone says the Trojan war never happened, in particular because it is bound up with the impossible story about a certain Achilles, having had Thetis, a sea-goddess, as his mother ... How could we substantiate this, especially as we are embarrassed by the fictitious stories which for some unknown reason are bound up with the opinion, which everyone believes, that there really was a war in Troy between the Greeks and Trojans? ... How could we prove the historicity of a story like this? ... Anyone who reads the stories with a fair mind ... will decide what he will accept and what he will interpret allegorically, searching out the meaning of the authors who wrote such fictitious stories, and what he will disbelieve as having been written to gratify certain people. We have said this by way of introduction to the whole question of the narrative about Jesus in the gospels, not in order to invite people with intelligence to mere irrational faith, but with a desire to show that readers need an open mind and considerable study, and, if I may say so, need to enter into the mind of the writers to find out with what spiritual meaning each event was recorded.²

One may perhaps question Strauss' statement that Origen here was "verging towards the more modern mythical view." Yet the passage is remarkable for inviting Greek-style rational criticism of the gospels, at least in theory. In practice, instances in which Origen rejects the historicity of the Gospel narrative outright are, as Strauss points out, "meagre in the extreme."³ No wonder that for a long time Origen's admonition had no more effect upon his readers than it had upon himself. It can be argued that a critical attitude towards biblical as well as classical texts did not develop until the age of Valla, Lefèvre d'Etaples and Erasmus, of whom the two latter were, in fact, great admirers of Origen.

In the seventeenth century two developments occurred that need to be recalled at this point. While classical scholars refined and perfected the methods of textual criticism, it fell to a biblical scholar to produce the first critical histories of a text. Richard Simon's *Histoire critique*

² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.42; the translation is Henry Chadwick's (Cambridge 1953) 39f.
³ Strauss, *The Life of Jesus* cit. 39-43 (§§ 1, 2, 4).