Conclusion

The ideas of Christian Theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction [...]
Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*

One of the consequences of the nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus was a marked growth in biblical fiction. The more energetically European theologians sought out the Jesus of fact and history, the more he became a figure of the fictive imagination. It was a paradox that was particularly pronounced in Britain. Somewhat inclined to take up a conservative, even reactionary stance to the Higher Criticism, the British turned instead to Lives of Jesus, in many respects a pragmatic response to the ever-increasing divide between the Christ of dogmatic Christology and the Jesus of history. The majority of English Lives of Jesus were not, as any serious theologian would have wished, produced by scholars of religion. William Sanday, one of Britain’s foremost biblical critics during the years covered in this study, was one of those who steadfastly resisted the lure of Gospel biography, choosing instead to publicize the work of Continental scholars to an English readership through numerous critical studies and journal articles. The most influential and popular Victorian Lives were written by non-theologians: *Ecce Homo* was the work of an historian, with successive prominent biographies coming from the pens of churchmen such as F. W. Farrar, William Hanna and Alfred Edersheim. While critical apparatus in the form of footnotes and lists of scholarly authorities gave these Lives some semblance of the academic method, there was little serious theology to be found beyond the paratexts. This absence of theological rigour and engagement was very much as D. F. Strauss had predicted in 1865:
And so the conception of a life of Christ was ominous of coming change. It anticipated the broad results of modern theological development. It lay as a snare in the path of the latter, prognosticating in its special incompatibilities the general disruption of traditional belief. It was as a pit into which theology was inevitably destined to fall and to become extinguished.¹

The prevailing taste for Lives of Jesus was not only held responsible for casting theology into the pit: it was also arraigned for failing to take seriously the responsibilities of the biographer. As one turn-of-the-century critic pointed out: ‘[T]here was always a desire among these writers to display more of the artist than of the biographer. Whether conservative or liberal, they aimed more at edifying their respective audiences than at making them acquainted with the real events of the time.’² In looking back over a half-century or so of Lives, this observer is able to identify what Strauss could not have foreseen in the 1860s – that the main method of presenting Jesus was often closer to that of the fiction writer than the theologian. In an era of increasing religious uncertainty, investing studies of Jesus with the narrative qualities of the popular novel had become a vital means of either protecting the Scriptures from the destructive influence of theological modernism or, rather less commonly, of making modern scholarship more readable for the non-specialist. Though essentially conservative in their aims, stylistic register and religious sentiments, Lives of Jesus were nonetheless the products of modernity, moving the reader slowly but surely away from notions of divinity; after all, a part-human, part-supernatural being was not the usual stuff of biography. The sheer bulk of Lives of Jesus testifies to their essentially fictive nature: the spare narratives of the New Testament could only expand to such proportions through the addition of extra-biblical material generated by a lively imagination. As the literary marketplace became ever more competitive, and society became ever more accepting of this blend of religious biography and fiction, it was perhaps inevitable that one element of the hybrid would gain prominence. Writing in the 1880s, the poet and novelist Robert Buchanan asserted confidently that:

> We have reached the vantage-ground where the story of Jesus can be taken out of the realm of Supernaturalism and viewed humanly, in the domain of sympathetic Art. To even so late an observer as Rénan [sic] such a point of view was difficult, not to say impossible.³
And indeed, in the last quarter of the century, orthodox and heterodox alike abandoned the speculative mood of the biographer and fought out their respective views of the Gospels through the novel or short story. In most cases, writers of biblical prose fiction paid far more attention to the demands of narrative than to those of theology. Details from the four Evangels were selected for their imaginative appeal – regardless of scholarly views on their historical credibility – and were woven into a form of narrative harmony akin to those formerly constructed by pious Christians in an attempt to erase the disturbing discrepancies of the four-fold Gospels. Similarly, theological hypotheses were selected with an eye to their inventive potential rather than their academic respectability.

The formal marriage of literature and theology was not, in its early years at least, a very happy one, often failing to gain the approval of either the serious theologian or the discerning literary author or critic. Despite the tendency of most religious fiction writers to put aesthetics before theology, the resulting novels and short stories were rarely worthy of notice. Most of the works in this study show clear signs of their authors having struggled to adapt a source text whose lexis was so deeply embedded in the national consciousness. Moreover, the growing tendency of more liberal Victorians to regard the New Testament first and foremost as a great work of literature made it an even more intractable subject for creative rewriting. Just as today’s filmic adaptations of classic novels are often deemed poor imitations of the originals, so artistic treatments of the Gospels were compared to their sources and found wanting. Authors attempting fictional transfigurations of the Bible risked bathos if they translated the language of the Authorized Version into the vernacular, and stylistic infelicity if they opted instead for a mix of archaism and direct quotation. And it was not only the primary sources of the New Testament that were a cause for anxiety. The shadowy presence of secondary sources such as Ernest Renan’s *Life of Jesus*, which can be felt in several imaginative depictions of Jesus of the late nineteenth century, attests to the considerable weight of influence under which their authors laboured.

Of the fictional works considered here, none could be pronounced remarkable on literary grounds alone. This is due in part to the authors’ unfamiliarity with the process of transforming a sacred history (or myth) into prose fiction. While poetry and drama had a long-established tradition of recreating ancient texts to suit contemporary tastes and interests, the novel was a genre relatively new to the
adaptive mode, its very quiddity residing in the novelty of its subject matter. In its early stages, New Testament fiction tended to suffer from the artistic caution discernible in Philochristus, which, of all the works considered in this study, is the most strongly rooted in modern theology. Moreover, the historicism of such writings demanded the subtle weaving of contextual detail into the fictional narrative, a task that frequently resulted in stylistic maladroitness or pleonasm. Of the fictional recreations of the Gospels considered here, Wilde’s apologues come closest to fulfilling his own artistic dictum that the ‘originality [...] which we ask from the artist, is originality of treatment, not of subject’. Yet this is thanks in no small part to their purely oral existence, which allowed them to be endlessly remodelled, and which bestowed on them a certain ludic quality, conspicuously absent from the vast majority of late-1890s’ religious fiction. Wilde’s free-wheeling narratives benefited not only from their oral status, but also from their author’s insouciant disregard for biblical criticism. Free from any compulsion to demonstrate scholarly know-how or affiliation, he privileges the demands of narrative over those of theology, showing a particular flair for capturing the language of the Gospels at the same time as exploiting their fictional potential. While most adaptations of the Scriptures suffered from the burden of authorial conviction, involved scholarly theories or purple prose, Wilde’s managed to raise questions germane to a variety of theological issues in a manner at once subtle and arresting. Yet, as Holbrook Jackson points out in his study of Wilde, the author’s intellectual playfulness was often mistaken for lack of seriousness by a public ‘still to learn that one can be as serious in one’s play with ideas as in one’s play with a football’, and the lukewarm reception of the few biblical prose poems that made it into print suggests that he may have been just a few too many steps ahead of his time.

The increasing secularity of the twentieth century made for a more liberal reading public, affording writers of biblical fiction greater freedom to experiment. Waiting until the 1910s to develop his New Testament fiction enabled George Moore to venture into territory hitherto unexplored. The Brook Kerith is the first recasting of the Gospels that fully attempts to imagine the workings of the mind of Jesus in a narrative that embraces multiple viewpoints and free indirect speech, and that moves the figure of Christ out of the boundaries of the Gospel story to wander freely into an unknown future in the East. Unlike Wilde, Moore was determined to effect a merger between
modern theology and prose fiction, and he must surely take the prize for creating the most up-to-the-minute figure of Christ, one much more in line with the views of contemporary continental writers such as Albert Schweitzer than the long since outmoded Ernest Renan. Yet while the contemporaneity of Moore’s novel is beyond dispute, its literary value is rather less certain. Though singled out in William Hamilton’s 1993 study, *The Quest for the Post-Historical Jesus*, as an exception to the rule that when novelists take on the subject of Jesus the result is ‘depressingly bad’, *The Brook Kerith* is by no means an ideal model. Moore’s attempts to capture the melodic rhythms of the Bible, at the same time as demonstrating a detailed biblical-critical knowledge, are only partially successful, and the novel is undoubtedly uneven in its quality. In some respects it confirms Wilde’s oft-quoted dictum that it is only the modern who ever become old-fashioned; in striving to present a Jesus figure in line with contemporary thought, Moore guarantees that it will be quick to date. Now out of fashion and out of print, Moore’s Syrian story looks unlikely ever to regain its place as one of the most popular novels of its time.

No amount of authorial daring, originality or sincerity can entirely extenuate the aesthetic shortcomings of the published New Testament fictions covered in this study. Yet that is not to say that they are without value. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode writes that ‘Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change.’ It is a definition that holds particularly true for the religious fictions of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, which, spurred on by theological revisionism, sought to make sense of rapid and profound changes in Christian thought and feeling. Representations of Christ in both the short story and the novel attest to both an enduring attachment to, and a liberation from, his image. Those who fully accepted that Jesus was not divine still needed to account for how and why he had commanded so many followers for so many centuries. As Renan points out when discussing the work of Strauss: ‘What he leaves subsisting in the Gospels is not sufficient to account for the faith of the Apostles […] It must have been, in other words, that the person of Jesus had singularly exceeded the ordinary proportions […]’ And there were many competing versions of exactly how Jesus went beyond these ‘ordinary proportions’. Fiction writers of all religious persuasions could interpret the Evangelical records to mould Christ into their own image: the poet, the philanthropist, the teacher, the social reformer. Robert Graves, an
author who would make his own contribution to the genre of Jesuine fiction in the 1940s, observed that:

The Gospels remind us how many irreconcilable attitudes can be adopted towards a single confused subject. Thus, the orthodox religious attitude: ‘The Gospels must be accepted as a final court of appeal in all moral cases.’ The unorthodox religious attitude: ‘It is the greatest story in the world, but we doubt whether Jesus rose again from the dead.’ The rationalistic attitude: ‘A story that begins with virgin-birth and a travelling star cannot be taken seriously.’

Writers of Gospel fiction offered an important means by which such varying approaches to the ‘confused subject’ of Jesus could be explored. In helping modern readers find significance in early Christian texts through their literary re-shaping and re-imagining, such writers fulfilled a Midrashic role, albeit one that tended to overlook the exigencies of literary aesthetics.

As the twentieth century wore on, so those intent on upholding the divinity and sanctity of the figure of Christ had to contend with ever more powerful media. The private, individual activity of fiction-reading began to look less threatening in comparison with the public, collective activity of the cinema and radio and television broadcasting, all of which were quick to take up the challenge of depicting Jesus for a twentieth-century audience. Nowadays, as notions of the sacred become less and less rigid and more and more remote, those artists hoping to create new and thought-provoking images of Christ tend to resort to shock tactics to capture the modern imagination. Such tactics often involve the sexualizing of New Testament characters: Gore Vidal’s novel \textit{Live from Golgotha} (1992) imagines an obese Jesus with hormonal problems and an erotomaniacal, homosexual Paul; \textit{Jerry Springer: The Opera} depicts a coprophiliac, nappy-wearing Jesus; and an art exhibition at the Baltic Centre in Gateshead recently featured a statue of a priapic Christ. None of these works has passed without public comment, though as \textit{The Guardian}’s headline to an article reporting the \textit{Jerry Springer} controversy makes clear, such images of Christ now tend only to shock ‘The Moral Minority’.

In our present century, then, controversies over the artistic and literary appropriation of the Bible, though by no means a thing of the past, have certainly been pushed to the sidelines. In the nineteenth century, however, radically shifting theological perspectives, coupled
with a certain mistrust of fiction itself, ensured that any such controversies would be conducted *coram populo*, with an urgency that many today would find hard to fathom. Those who engaged in such controversies – be they the most hardened secularist or the most pious of evangelicals – were, generally speaking, serious-minded, well acquainted with the detail of the Scriptures and, in some cases, with developments in religious scholarship. Nineteenth-century readers of mainstream journals were likely to encounter reviews and articles concerning issues such as the historical origins of Christianity, the authorship of the Gospels and competing theories about the resurrection. This is certainly not the case with today’s common reader. When, just a few years back, academics rushed to correct the egregious errors in Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, it was clear that twenty-first-century readers were, in some respects, more vulnerable to cod-theology than their Victorian predecessors – and no less attracted by the lure of biblically based fiction. The laboured prose, hackneyed characterization and implausible plot line of Brown’s blockbuster novel might make us question whether the survival of New Testament fiction is really something to be celebrated and, certainly, in the last fifteen years or so, we have witnessed both the highs and lows of the genre. *Quarantine*, the Booker-shortlisted novel by Jim Crace – a post-Dawkins atheist – has won great literary acclaim for its evocation of Jesus’s forty days in the Judean desert; while Jeffrey Archer’s *The Gospel According to Judas*, for all its endorsement from a professor of theology, has met with almost universal ridicule. Whatever the artistic merits of today’s biblical fiction might be, there is no doubt that it springs from the rich and varied foundations laid down by Victorian and Edwardian pioneers, writers who dared to re-imagine Jesus in a climate a great deal more censorious and hostile than our own.

Notes

1 Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus*, I, p. 3.