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# History and Happening: Notes on a Barth-Bultmann Dispute

In the eighteenth century, at the hands of philosophers for the most part, the meaning of the word 'historical' underwent a serious change* that affected very deeply the conceptual relation between calling something *historical* (or *unhistorical*) and saying (or denying) that it could or did *happen*. I want to examine one consequence of this change – in the area where philosophy and theology converse together – by looking at a few sentences made public by Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth in their well-known dispute about the resurrection texts.

Bultmann writes:

> [Barth] concedes to me, for example, that the resurrection of Jesus is not an historical fact which can be established by the means at the disposal of historical science. But from this he thinks it does not follow that it did not happen.[1]

Barth's concession carries this rider:

> Can such history, too, not really have taken place as history, and can there not also be a legitimate recognition of such history, which certainly for reasons of good taste we will abstain from calling an 'historical fact,' and which the historian in the modern sense may by all means call 'saga' or '*Legende*,' because it, in fact, shuns the means and methods together with the tacit presuppositions of this historian?[2]

Here 'good taste', a surprising category, holds Barth back from calling the resurrection an historical fact, but he will not let go of the idea that it happened. On the other hand, Bultmann sees an unbreakable link between denying that the resurrection is historical and denying that it happened. It really puzzles him, therefore, to hear Barth denying the one and affirming the other, and then following it up with allusions to a peculiar sort of history that historians cannot get their hands on. Words like 'saga,' Bultmann feels (and

*In a paper called 'Dr. Bultmann's Philosophical Troubles,' *Dialogue*, 8, 4 (1970), I try to trace the development of this change by looking at German philosophical climates in which the critical-historical method came to maturity. To sum up the results here would be impossible, but I have tried to make the references to that change ample enough to make this short paper self-contained.

1. Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, J. C. G. Greig, trans. (London, 1955), pp. 260–1.

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1962), III/2, 535; cited in Bultmann, *ibid.*

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rightly, I think) are just not blessed enough to convey what that sort of history is like. His next question follows naturally:

... what does Barth understand by 'have taken place as history' and 'history'? What kind of events are those about which it can be said that they 'have really taken place as history in time far more certainly than everything which the "historian" can establish as such?'[3]

A further example of how the notion of being historical and the notion of happening play against each other: Barth and Bultmann could reach the same impasse by agreeing at the start that the resurrection *happened*, but disagreeing about *what* took place historically. In other words, they would be agreeing that something happened, and Barth would say it was a rising from the tomb, but Bultmann would *interpret* the texts to mean not exactly that but rather an upsurge of belief or faith among the first disciples:

The resurrection itself is not an event of past history. All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection.[4]

An historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable![5]

Expressed either way, the impasse concerns the conceptual link between being historical and happening. Before looking more directly at this link, I would like to make two observations.

FIRST OBSERVATION

Notice that both parties bring in the notion of *faith*, each in his own way, in order to throw light on the Easter texts. Barth speaks in general of the believer's 'endowing' his reading of the texts 'with faith,' faith then being the thing that enables the believer to receive the narrative as that of a real happening, or to receive it with no questions asked. Bultmann of course protests:

... Further; what kind of way of 'endowing with faith' is it, if faith is to be [brought over against] the assertion of events which are said to have taken place as history in time and history, yet cannot be established by the means and methods of historical science? How do these events come into the believer's field of vision? And how is such faith distinguished from a blind acceptance involving a *sacrificium intellectus*?[6]

The notion of faith comes into Bultmann's interpretation in a different way, not as enabling the believer to accept the Easter texts with no questioning, but as the thing those texts are really talking about. Under the 'inconceivable'

3. Bultmann, *ibid.*
4. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, R. H. Fuller, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 42.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
6. Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, p. 261.

figure of a dead man springing up and an empty tomb, the texts are really telling us that 'faith in the word of preaching' sprang up in the disciples shortly after the crucifixion.[7]

I would like to argue that an appeal to faith on either side clouds the issue. In a certain sense both thinkers are forced to use this appeal. That is, if there really is a difficulty in believing the Easter texts, as both parties assume, then the theologian must show a way around that difficulty; faith is that way, we are told, whether viewed in the Barthian manner, as assistance in leaping over the stile, or in the Bultmannian, as a category of explanation to account for resurrection texts without having to suppose a resurrection.

Is it at all necessary to bring in the distinctively Christian category of *faith* to account for belief in the resurrection on the part of either the disciples or later Christians? As far as the disciples are concerned, ordinary powers of perception would enable someone to recognize a face, a voice, a familiar presence, over an interval of a few days. I do not mean here to assume the historicity of the event, but merely to observe that faith is a more formidable category than Bultmann needs; it would be more natural, and no less guarded, to speak of the disciples trusting their faculties when confronted with what *looked* like a resurrection.

When we encounter belief in the resurrection in persons of later times, who can claim no perceptual acquaintance with the event, must *faith* be brought in to explain their believing? How we answer this will depend on how we look at two assumptions, both held by Barth and Bultmann, and both questionable. The first is that theologians by and large understand what 'believing in the resurrection' *means*, however much they may disagree about historicity and the like. The second is that coming to believe in the resurrection brings a man up to a ditch he must somehow get across, and that *faith* is the all-purpose plank for bridging ditches of this sort. Barth no less than Bultmann talks this way. For the moment we may leave unsettled what 'believing in the resurrection' means and, within that meaning, whether there exists an impediment in coming to believe. My immediate aim is to resist invoking the notion of faith as a convenience whenever a supposed difficulty in believing crops up. At longer range I want to suggest that there is a rainbow of disparate meanings of the verb 'to believe,' even within the limited firmament of religious discourse.

## SECOND OBSERVATION

According to Barth, Bultmann, and many others, the canons of proper historical science are what exclude the resurrection from the sphere of 'historical fact.' This idea is deeply entrenched, of course, in the German tradition of biblical criticism. It appears, recently, for example, in Gerhard Ebeling's truism that death summarily closes the lid on a person's historical existence. Ebeling tells us that, among other things 'ruled out' as not pertaining to 'the historical Jesus,' are those statements in the tradition which seem, indeed, to have the character of historical reports, yet which cannot by any means be considered

7. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 41.

as historical statements about Jesus, and above all those on the resurrection, the risen appearances, and the ascension.[8]

Now this way of putting the matter makes it appear that history, or historical science, possesses an astringent, no-nonsense inner nature, a nature that contrasts with that of the simple-minded fellow who is ready to believe anything he is told. It would not be stretching a point to call this idea the rock that German theology lost its keel on. If it is correct in the first place to place the resurrection beyond the reach of historical science, the reason for this will be so commonplace as mostly to go without saying. It need not mean at all that the extraordinary levitation of faith is required to transport a reader over and past the Easter texts to a belief in the resurrection. Nor need it mean that the method of historical science is too chaste and haughty to countenance talk of the humanly impossible.

With these two observations on record, we can move back into the immediate breach between Barth and Bultmann. First of all, when both sides accept the thesis that the resurrection 'cannot' be established by historical methods, it pays to look very closely at this imperious 'cannot.' The word suggests effort ending in failure, and there has been a lot of that, but it might also suggest that the effort is doomed from the start. Let us ask then, in precisely what sense is the resurrection beyond reach of historians? In what sense are they barred from it by a 'cannot'? I mean, for what commonplace reason? (Unverifiability would not be a commonplace reason in our sense of the term.) Is it not the fact that the resurrection is an unpublic event that cuts the historian off? The event belongs, as happening, strictly to that band of men and women who were personally acquainted with Jesus in his ministry and crucifixion, and who alone could say 'This is indeed he' on beholding him afterwards, and who alone could swear to it. Our historian exists at a later time. Even if imaginatively he places himself at the scene where people are hailing Jesus as one returned from the grave, there will be nothing in that scene constraining him, the historian, to use those terms. As far as he is concerned, there would just be that man walking about, and other people saying strange things at the sight of him.

In this sense alone, then, the resurrection 'cannot' be established by historical methods: *its looking like a resurrection* to an historian presupposes the historian's contemporaneity with the resurrected person. Notice that this fact has no legislative power over what can and cannot *happen*.[9]

To approach this from another direction, let us consider the sense in which the historian 'cannot' establish the feeding of the multitudes with a few loaves and fishes. Here we have no question of a privileged viewer. The report that a quantity of food was mysteriously increased does not require that the

8. Gerhardt Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, J. W. Leitch, trans. (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 292.

9. John Baillie, *And the Life Everlasting* (New York, 1957). At several points Baillie takes note of the unpublic or semi-private character of the resurrection-event; see especially pp. 163–85.

reporter perform an act of recognition grounded in his acquaintance with a particular person. What is meant by saying the historian 'cannot' establish *this* event? He can put himself imaginatively into that scene, but what would he see? A magic breadbasket? From the point of view of a human witness, the event would be baffling, and presumably no historically useful point would be served by establishing that a party of individuals one day saw something they could not explain. The only thing historians 'cannot' do in this kind of a case is find occasion for recording instances of the embarrassingly singular. Again, this has nothing to do with what can and cannot happen.

For ordinary and not very deep reasons like these, it is correct and even trite to say that many New Testament events are beyond the reach of historical methods. Sad to say, the whole German tradition of critical-historical study of the Bible stumbles on this point by construing it as entailing questions of believing and doubting, questions of what did and did not really *happen*. To bring out the nature of the trouble, let us take up again the question of what it means to 'believe in the resurrection,' or what is *called* doing that. We may first ask: what does it mean to *believe* that Jesus fed the multitudes as in Mark 6:41–2? It is important to keep in mind that we have set these two events beyond reach of the historian's *methods*, so that suspicion should be aroused if someone suggests that the historian's kind of *doubt* has a point in connection with them; for that kind of doubt is allayed or confirmed by that kind of method. To believe that Jesus fed the multitudes means nothing more than to be able to read Mark 6:41–2 unvexed by the historian's kind of doubt. If a person can do this, the Christian world has in general no further question as to whether he believes this bit of the New Testament. This is, I am suggesting, how the word 'believe' is used in connection with Mark 6.

What we are working against here is the idea, well established in the German critical-historical tradition, that believing in connection with the New Testament means just about the same thing no matter what texts you are talking about. This mistaken view of the concept of belief leads to the idea that *each text presents a specific challenge to be believed.* It is necessary to part with this idea in order even to consider the possibility that 'to believe' may mean one thing in relation to Mark 6:41–2, something quite different in relation to the resurrection pericopes, and something else again with regard to the incarnation. Once this is established, mountains of painful biblical interpretation become as useless as slagheaps. I have in mind analyses such as Schweitzer's:

> Our solution is that the whole [of Mark 6:41–2] is historical except the closing remark that they were all filled. Jesus distributed the provisions which He and His disciples had with them among the multitude so that each received a very little, after He had first offered thanks. The significance lies in the giving of thanks and in the fact that they had received from Him consecrated food ...[10]

10. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, W. Montgomery, trans. (London, 1963), p. 376.

Schweitzer's need for this or a similar solution reveals the sort of nagging, low-grade anxiety about believing too much that torments the critical-historical tradition.

Before returning to the resurrection question, let us consider the concept of belief that is inherent in those worries about believing too much. The concept of belief that goes with approving one text at a time as 'historical' or rejecting this or that fragment as 'unhistorical' or, worse, 'untheological,' is very much congruent with the meaning of 'to believe' or 'to accept' that has become normative in historical science. There the historian stands in a peculiar relation to reports of past events. His task is to achieve consecutiveness, and he performs it by first probating and then incorporating those reports piecemeal. This task involves a series of distinct decisions about the incorporability of each bit, and those that merit incorporation may be prefaced with a stock phrase such as 'Historians now believe ...' A kind of starchy professional doubt goes with this method, precisely as a preventive against incorporating reports uncritically. Again, though, where this *method* is for any reason nonfunctional, the kind of *doubt* that goes with it loses its point.

If we let ourselves suppose that 'to believe' as applied to New Testament teachings always means the same thing – that meaning being first to probate or approve a given report in some manner and then to incorporate it into one's own stock of beliefs – then we will be hewing pretty closely to the sense of 'to believe' adopted by biblical criticism from historical science. The more serious matter, however, is that by so doing we will have wandered very far from the meanings of 'believe' that go with words like 'believer.' The cost of assimilating those differences of meaning is beyond all estimating.

To bring out one such difference in the meaning of 'to believe,' let us compare what believing means in connection with the resurrection with what it means in the instance already given (where the mere absence of the historian's kind of doubt is all that is asked for or called for in the believer – certainly nothing resembling the historian's 'probate and incorporate'). Now, what is meant by 'believing in the resurrection'? With that event a new element enters into the meaning of 'to believe': namely, celebration. If a person celebrates Easter, he can be described as 'believing in the resurrection.' We hardly need to add that as celebrant he is free also from the historian's kind of doubt. In relation to feeding the multitude, there was no mention of celebration as figuring in belief. Here we are turning up something different from the kind of common core of meaning in the verb 'to believe' or 'accept' that can be found in the historian's conventionalized 'probate and incorporate.' We are noticing distinct applications of the word 'believe' or 'accept.'

It would be misleading, incidentally, to talk as though the resurrection story called upon the reader to perform a separate act of believing it, *after* which he would be prepared to celebrate. This claim would conflate two distinct uses of 'to believe': the historian's professional use and one of the believer's manifold uses. This is all too easy to do, because biblical criticism has, in effect, installed

the historian's use as normative, that is, as what 'to believe' really means, and all the considerable force of scholarly salesmanship stands behind the installation.

When the historian's sense of 'to believe' is dominant, a theologian can come to imagine himself related to the resurrection in the same way as a historian is related to a past event. The historian who is at the same time a believer puts himself in a celebrant relation to the resurrection, for that is what it means to believe *this* event took place, but *qua* historian he stands in no relation at all to the event. This is not for any deep reason, but for the reason given before – that the event is essentially unpublic. By no means does it follow, however, that a human being cannot celebrate, whether he happens to be an historian or something else, unless in him the science of history should have surprised everyone by becoming flesh.

The following conclusions seem to come out of all this. Historical science and the question of what it may or may not see fit to incorporate into its documents have nothing at all to do with whether the resurrection *happened.* To be sure, there is something in the idea that the resurrection is beyond reach of historical methods. Quite ordinary reasons can be given for this, reasons which in no way indict the believer for believing in excess of the respectable minimum specified by biblical criticism. In agreeing, however, that the historian 'cannot' get at the resurrection – where the 'cannot' remains unanalyzed – Barth and Bultmann alike implicitly place the resurrection among events concerning which the historian's kind of doubt has a point. But the historian's doubt has a role here no greater or less than his method, which is to say no role at all. When the 'cannot' under analysis turns out to be an existential 'cannot,' namely, to consist in the fact that as flesh-and-blood the historian cannot transport himself backward in time, strike up an acquaintance with Jesus, and put himself in position to see the resurrection ***looking*** like a resurrection, then it becomes evident that this 'cannot' has no bearing at all on whether this or that event really happened. For Bultmann there is an inference from this 'cannot' touching the credibility of the Easter narratives, an inference Barth rightly refuses to draw. This is why Barth can 'concede' that the resurrection is not a historical fact and yet say it happened, though his choice of the word 'saga' is inexpedient, since it hints at but does not deliver a clear distinction between kinds of history. The disturbance between Barth and Bultmann thus arises from want of a precise expression for the 'cannot' that stands between the historian and the resurrection. Both theologians stand in want of that precise expression, and for this reason it seems to me unwise to come out for either side in their disagreement.