Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:

https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology

https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb

PayPal https://paypal.me/robbradshaw

A table of contents for the *Journal of Theological Studies (old series)* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jts-os_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[1st page of article]

THE RESURRECTION APPEARANCES.

THE recent volume of Oxford Essays[1] will receive a hearty welcome from those who desire to see modern difficulties of belief handled in a modern way and in language which is not too technical to appeal to a wide circle of readers. It is characterized, as a whole, by a refreshing optimism which believes that careful statement or, if need be, re-statement is the best defence of the fundamental truths of the Christian religion. The Essayists are not all of one mind, even in some matters of first-rate importance; but they are united by a spirit of devout reverence for the high topics which they have ventured to treat. Some of them might perhaps allow, in view of conclusions reached in essays other than their own, that here and there the volume offers what might be called tenable positions rather than secure foundations. The variety of mental, and even of theological, outlook adds to the value as well as to the interest of the book, especially when it is regarded as a study rather than as a pronouncement.

A hearty welcome is not inconsistent with a measure of friendly criticism; and the present very incomplete review of a few of the Essays will for the most part be confined to points which specially challenge attention and seem to require reconsideration. I have been unwilling to make so imperfect a contribution to this JOURNAL, but it has been urged upon me that an immediate notice might serve a useful purpose, and that other essays might be dealt with by other writers. The essays on 'The Historic Christ' and 'The Interpretation of the Christ' appeal most directly to my interest, or, perhaps I should say, lie most in the line of my own studies; but I cannot refrain from a brief comment on the essay on 'The Atonement'. I shall take these essays in the reverse order.

1. Mr Moberly's exposition of the difficulties which attend the

[1] *Foundations: A Statement of Christian Belief in Terms of Modern Thought*, by seven Oxford men. (Macmillan & Co., 1912.)

earlier theories of the doctrine of the Atonement is written in a chaste and winning style and with remarkable lucidity. It is only when we reach the statement of the new conception which was offered in his father's impressive book, *Atonement and Personality*, that we feel disappointment. The use of the term 'penitence' in the interpretation of our Lord's relation to the sin of mankind still remains to trouble us. Long ago McLeod Campbell spoke of Christ as the Great Confessor of Humanity; and perhaps these words venture as far as we may rightly go in this particular direction. We may admit that the thought offered to us by Dr Moberly, and insisted on afresh by his son, reaches nearer to the heart of the mystery: we may admit also that the boldness of the thought may find a justification in the astonishing words of St Paul, 'He made Him to be sin for us'. Yet it might have been hoped that the thought would be capable of a somewhat different presentation, which should not necessitate the use of the word 'penitence' in a sense which to many must seem as unreal as it is unfamiliar.

Does not *penitence*, we are bound to ask, involve as an indispensable element *self-blame*, and not merely the sense of shame? Must not its language be, '*We* have sinned . . . of our own fault'? Love's self-identification with the sinner may go as far as the sense of shame, on the ground of physical relationship (as of mother and child) or of deeply affectionate friendship. It may go as far as self-blame without losing touch with reality, if it is conscious that further effort on its part might have prevented the shameful issue. But can self-blame be genuine where *ex hypothesi* there has been no responsibility for the sin?

May we not enter a plea for an exposition of the *thought*, if this be possible, which shall avoid the employment of the word *penitence* in a non-natural sense? If it is not possible—if the theory depends on this new use of the word, we cannot hope that the plain man will find satisfaction in it.

2. The essay on 'The Interpretation of the Christ', which is offered as the joint production of Mr Rawlinson and Mr Parsons, is of special value in its study of the Christology of St Paul. It is linked on to the preceding essay, of which we are to speak presently, by some thoughtful paragraphs which indicate a different position, more particularly in regard to the Resurrec-

tion of our Lord. The importance of the eschatological hope which the earliest believers had received (with whatever modifications) from their Master is duly recognized, and the history of that hope in St Paul's experience and teaching is well expressed. The essay weakens towards the close, and it may be regretted that the Fourth Gospel should have been treated at all, if it could only be considered in a few pages—*ne taceretur*, as the writers themselves admit.

Even in the excellent study of St Paul some points suggest a too eager adoption of the newest affirmations of modern interpreters. The assertion that the Corinthians were regarding the Eucharist *ex opere operato* as a mechanical guarantee of salvation has been taken over much too hastily, and the suggestion which connects this misinterpretation with 'the theology of the mysteries' will not serve to commend it for long. Indeed the paragraphs on the Greek 'Mystery Religions' which immediately precede, modern as they are in their conception, are almost obsolete already, and may well be removed from a second edition of the book. The curious amalgam which goes by the name of 'the theology of the mysteries' falls to pieces when it is confronted by the original texts. Moreover, one of the services which Schweitzer has recently rendered has been his emphatic and reasoned judgement that no influence of this kind can be securely traced in the writings of St Paul. The recasting of this section of the essay would enhance the value of an admirable contribution to the study of the Pauline theology.

3. Mr Streeter's study of 'The Historic Christ' will fascinate the attention of all serious readers of this volume. It deserves at every point the most careful consideration. It opens with a eulogy of Dr Schweitzer and the 'thorough-going eschatologists'. But Mr Streeter's own elaborate investigations in the Synoptic Problem enable him to steer clear of the numerous mistakes into which Schweitzer was led owing to his ignorance or neglect of what is called 'the lower criticism'. One exception must be made in our congratulation on this head. Even Mr Streeter can allow himself to represent John the Baptist as saying, 'The kingdom of God is at hand' (p. 93). But the only statement to this effect in the New Testament is the verse in St Matthew, where the words, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand',

are placed in the mouth of the Baptist. Neither St Mark nor St Luke corroborates this. We need not indeed deny the possibility that the Baptist may have spoken of the kingdom of God. But, from the point of view of Synoptic criticism, we are bound to observe that the writer of St Matthew's Gospel is at this point following St Mark's narrative, and is himself responsible for the change of St Mark's phrase, 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins' into 'preaching . . . saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'—a phrase which he introduces again later as his paraphrase of St Mark's summary of the preaching of our Lord at the opening of the Galilean ministry (Matt. iv 17, Mark i 15). On critical grounds it appears certain that in both places the writer of St Matthew's Gospel is offering us a paraphrase of his own, which (however justifiable as a paraphrase) ought not to be made the basis of a historical argument. Accordingly, when this phrase is measured at its due value from the point of view of Synoptic criticism, it is legitimate to doubt whether the Baptist himself ever spoke of the kingdom of God, and we shall be more than ever disinclined to admit Mr Streeter's unfortunate description of John as being an 'Apocalyptist' as well as a 'Prophet'. Surely it is ancient Hebrew prophecy, and not 'apocalyptic' in the hitherto accepted sense of the term, that forms the background of the Baptist's preaching.

The point here in question is not so trifling as might at first sight appear. There is a characteristic distinction between the message of John and the message of Jesus, which is plainly discernible in the earlier strata of the evangelic records, though it is obscured by the paraphrastic modifications of St Matthew's Gospel. John says in effect, Repent, for fear of the Coming Wrath: Jesus says, Repent, in hope of the Coming Kingdom. Not indeed that John is without a hope: but the hope is in Another, who is to him 'the Coming One' (Mark i 7 ἔρχεται: Luke vii 19 ὁ ἐρχόμενος). He looks forward not to the Kingdom, but to the Mightier One whose way he is preparing. And even thus his hope is a fearful hope—a fiery baptism. By all means let us do the utmost justice to every indication of popular apocalyptic hope which the gospel narratives offer to us: but let us beware of exaggerations—and surely it is an exaggeration to represent John the Baptist as an Apocalyptist.

But we must pass on, tempted though we may be to consider other points in this stimulating essay, to that part of it which is certain to arouse the greatest misgiving in many of its readers. The gravity of the question raised in the section which treats of the Resurrection of our Lord necessitates a somewhat full discussion: it cannot, with justice to the writer, be dealt with in a summary fashion. At the outset we must gratefully recognize the entire reverence with which the Essayist handles the subject, and the modest and temperate tone in which he expresses his conclusions. A preliminary topic is happily removed from controversy by his definite acceptance, on the ground of his reading of the history, of the fact of the Empty Tomb.

We start then with two admitted historical facts: (*a*) The Body of Jesus was not to be found in the tomb on the morning of the first day of the week; (*b*) On that same day and from time to time afterwards the Lord manifested Himself to His disciples, but 'not to all the people'. How are we to link up these two facts?

1. No question seems to have arisen in the early days. It was enough to say, 'God raised Him from the dead on the third day'. The Church found no difficulty in the thought that the material Body was resuscitated and left the tomb; and that by the exercise of miraculous power the Lord could make it visible or invisible, recognizable or unrecognizable, as He chose, and could at last pass up with it from earth to heaven at the Ascension.

This material view of a revival of the physical Body has in our days proved exceedingly difficult; and the difficulty has made itself felt most keenly in regard to the Ascension. The changed conception of the earth's form and of its place in the solar system made it impossible any longer to conceive of heaven as a locality somewhere far above our heads. And the question could not but be asked, Where did the material Body go to? No answer was forthcoming.

Other objections connected with the nature of physical bodies, with their natural life-story of growth, age, and dissolution, further discredited the simple notion of a revival of the Body that had been crucified. It also came to be felt that, as our own resurrection could not now be thought of as a reassembling of the material elements of our present bodies and their physical

restoration to life, so too the Lord's resurrection could not rightly be interpreted in the old way, if it was indeed to be the type of the resurrection life for ourselves.

2. The sacred documents were interrogated afresh. It was observed that the various narratives included details which pointed the way to a new conception of the character of our Lord's Body after the Resurrection.[1] A change had passed over it. It was the same, and yet not the same. It was released from the old limitations: it was wholly under the control of the Spirit which it served.

I think it is of some importance at the present moment to call attention to the masterly exposition of this conception which was given us by Bishop Westcott in his series of studies which is entitled *The Revelation of the Risen Lord.* A few paragraphs must be quoted in full.

> The Revelation of the Risen Christ is, indeed, in the fullest sense of the word, a Revelation; an unveiling of that which was before undiscovered and unknown.
>
> Nothing perhaps (if we may anticipate results yet to be established) is more surprising in the whole sum of inspired teaching than the way in which the different appearances of Christ after His Resurrection meet and satisfy the aspirations of man towards a knowledge of the unseen world. As we fix our thoughts steadily upon them we learn how our life is independent of its present conditions; how we also can live through death; how we can retain all the issues of the past without being bound by the limitations under which they were shaped. Christ rose from the grave changed and yet the same; and in Him we have the pledge and the type of our rising.
>
> Christ was changed. He was no longer subject to the laws of the material order to which His earthly life was previously conformed. As has been well said: 'What was natural to Him before is now miraculous; what was before miraculous is now natural.' Or to put the thought in another form, in an earthly life the spirit is manifested through the body; in the life of the Risen Christ the Body is manifested (may we not say so?) through the Spirit. He 'appears' and no longer is seen coming. He is found present, no one knows from whence; He passes away, no one knows whither. He stands in the midst of the group of Apostles *when the doors were shut for fear of the Jews. He vanishes out*

[1] Some early writers had ventured to speak of our Lord's Body as being immaterial after the Resurrection, but their speculations were incautious and failed to find acceptance.

of sight of the disciples whose eyes were opened that they should know Him. And at last *as they were looking He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.*

The continuity, the intimacy, the simple familiarity of former intercourse is gone. He is seen and recognized only as He wills, and when He wills. In the former sense of the phrase, He is no longer with the disciples. They have, it appears, no longer a natural power of recognizing Him. Feeling and thought require to be purified and enlightened in order that He may be known under the conditions of earthly life. There is a mysterious awfulness about His Person which first inspires fear and then claims adoration. He appointed a place of meeting with His Apostles, but He did not accompany them on their journey. He belongs already to another realm, so that the Ascension only ratifies and presents in a final form the lessons of the forty days in which it was included.

Thus Christ is seen to be changed, but none the less He is also seen to be essentially the same. Nothing has been left in the grave though all has been transfigured. He is the same, so that the marks of the Passion can become sensibly present to the doubting Thomas: the same, so that He can eat of the broiled fish which the disciples had prepared: the same, so that one word spoken with the old accent makes him known to the weeping Magdalene: the same, so that above all expectation and against the evidence of death, the Apostles could proclaim to the world that He who suffered upon the Cross had indeed redeemed Israel; the same in patience, in tenderness, in chastening reproof, in watchful sympathy, in quickening love. In each narrative the marvellous contrast is written—Christ changed and yet the same—without effort, without premeditation, without consciousness, as it appears, on the part of the Evangelists. And if we put together these two series of facts in which the contrast is presented, we shall see how they ennoble and complete our prospect of the future. It is not that Christ's soul lives on divested of the essence as of the accidents of the earthly garments in which it was for a time arrayed. It is not that His body, torn and wounded, is restored, such as it was, to its former vigour and beauty. But in Him soul and body, in the indissoluble union of a perfect manhood, are seen triumphant over the last penalty of sin.

The Gospel narratives thus offered fresh and welcome results to a closer study. It was observed, moreover, that St Paul, in speaking of the future of our bodies, had expressly declared that 'flesh and blood' could not inherit the kingdom of God. Alike for those who had died and for those who remained until

the Second Coming it would be necessary that 'this corruptible should put on incorruption': not that we desire to be 'unclothed' —so ran his own hope—'but clothed upon, that the mortal may be swallowed up by life'.

In this way a new conception was gained of our Lord's resurrection; a conception which met the difficulty as to the Ascension, and also brought His resurrection again into line with the future resurrection of Christians. A change had passed over the sacred Body in the tomb: such a change as brought it wholly under the control of the Spirit, made it spirit-ruled in the completest sense; dematerialized (if the word may for the moment be allowed), spiritualized; capable of being manifested at will, of being withdrawn at will. It could pass out of the grave-clothes without disturbing them: they were left for a witness, even as the stone was rolled back for a witness. The Lord was free to manifest Himself to whom He would, as He would, and when He would: and to close the series of His manifestations by ascending before the eyes of His disciples in this spiritual Body, which was no longer trammelled by the conditions of our earthly experience.

Now although this new interpretation removes certain obvious objections which have discredited the cruder view, and brings consistency into the statements of Scripture regarding our Lord's resurrection and the future resurrection of His followers, yet it remains altogether beyond the limits of our present experience and can only be accepted as a matter of faith. We cannot even conceive the process of change by which the material Body could be thus transformed and rendered a spiritual Body. It is a new thought offered to us by the Gospel narratives as interpreted by St Paul's declaration as to the nature of resurrection bodies.

The appearances of the Risen Lord are thus presented to us as a Revelation of a higher mode of human existence. We may accept them as such, notwithstanding our intellectual inability to comprehend them fully or to explain them in terms of our experience of physical life. Here, as everywhere in our Faith, we come quickly upon mystery. But we may remember that mystery is not peculiar to Religion; it accompanies all investigation of life, even upon its lowest levels.

3. Our Essayist seems unable to rest in this position. He desiderates a more intelligible conception.

He does not accept the theory that the appearances were nothing more than subjective visions, which originated in the minds of the disciples, as the outcome of the unique circumstances in which they were placed and the overpowering emotion which the Crucifixion had aroused in them. He is convinced that if the appearances are to be described as visions, yet they must be held to be the result of some external stimulus. And he is satisfied to believe that our Lord, having spiritually survived His death by crucifixion, was able as Spirit acting in the spiritual sphere to convey to His disciples the certainty of His ever-abiding life and His continued presence with them: to say in effect by such self-manifestations, 'I am the Living One; and I died; and, behold, I am alive for evermore'; and, further, 'I am with you all your days even unto the end of the world'.

That in the minds of the disciples these self-manifestations of the Living Lord took the form of bodily appearances was both necessary and inevitable. It was necessary, because in no other way could sufficient certainty, or indeed any certainty at all, be conveyed to them. And that they thought of them and spoke of them as the external appearances of a material body was inevitable: they with their mental limitations could not do otherwise; nor otherwise could they have conveyed their own certainty to those to whom they spoke.

But what then—for the question rises of itself—of the empty tomb? The historical evidence for this is to our Essayist's mind irrefragable. He can only make the suggestion that, although the natural explanations of the fact hitherto offered are quite unconvincing, we may not as yet have exhausted the possibilities of natural explanation, and may content ourselves with saying that in our present state of ignorance we cannot tell what became of the Body.

It is to be observed that our Essayist does not reject *a priori* the possibility of miracle, though he desires to call miracle in aid as little as possible. The 'objective vision' theory, as outlined above, itself involves the intervention of the Living Lord in a manner which is quite beyond our experience—which is, in other words, properly miraculous. 'It is the Lord's doing, and

it is marvellous in our eyes.' But it commends itself to him on the ground that it is more nearly analogous to our experience than the conception of the dematerialization of the Body and its subsequent control by the Spirit with a view to self-manifestation in a visible form.

Each of these conceptions (2 and 3) has its own difficulty. No question is raised with either as to the certainty of the continued life and activity of our Lord beyond the grave, or of His 'objective' spiritual presence with the faithful both then and now. The former conception is difficult, because it involves a transmutation of the earthly Body, and then a series of self-manifestations of the Lord in this transformed and spiritualized Body. The latter conception is difficult, because it too involves a series of self-manifestations of the Lord under the semblance of an earthly body. If these are not to be mere visions—and it is allowed (p. 134) that the New Testament writers give the impression that they very clearly distinguished them from subsequent appearances of the Lord in visions—they must involve a supernatural action to which our experience offers no secure parallel.

If this second conception appears less difficult on metaphysical grounds to certain minds, we are still bound to ask whether on grounds of history it is not more difficult than the first. The first gives an intelligible explanation of the fact that the tomb was empty: the second leaves that fact wholly unexplained. The Body must then have been conveyed away by human hands—the hands either of friends or of foes: if of friends, there was deception such as is utterly inconsistent with the whole story and its issue: if of enemies, the old question remains, Why, when the Resurrection was proclaimed and was exercising so potent an effect, was not the Body produced? Why was the proclamation met only by persecution, when an obvious remedy was at hand?

Further, when the whole course of the history is considered, can we believe that it would have been what it was if the disciples had not been persuaded that the Body had miraculously left the tomb? Would not the second conception fail altogether as a historical explanation, supposing that the disciples could have known that the Body was still somewhere on earth passing through the stages of corruption? And if it be suggested in reply

that a watchful Providence kept this fact from them lest their faith should fail of its needed intensity, are we not being asked to introduce an element of deception, or at least of permitted illusion, into the very foundation of the Christian Church?

To these difficulties which the second conception presents I can myself see no answer. The possible gain from the metaphysical point of view is altogether outweighed by the loss from the historical point of view: and this to my mind is decisive.

I can understand that by minds constituted or trained otherwise a decision will not be so readily reached. I would record my personal belief that the second conception, if carefully guarded from losing what I have termed its supernatural element, need not be considered inconsistent with the statement of the Creed, 'the third day He rose again from the dead'. Yet on the grounds which I have endeavoured to indicate I cannot think that it is a reasonable interpretation of the facts, or that it could commend itself to the general consciousness of the Christian Church.

J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON.