

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

THE RESURRECTION II

IN A PREVIOUS article¹ some current theories on the resurrection were stated and briefly discussed. The main point at issue was whether the resurrection was the cause or the product of the apostles' faith: that is, whether the resurrection was a real event, and whether it was the apostles' experience of the risen Lord which brought them to believe; or whether they first experienced the power and presence of Christ, and then expressed this by affirming that he was alive, and concluding that he must, therefore, have risen from the tomb. A lesser point at issue was whether it was consonant with christian faith to hold that the bones of the earthly Jesus could, theoretically, one day turn up in Palestine, without destroying that faith. It is now time to examine the New Testament evidence on these points.

Presuppositions

It is impossible to undertake an enquiry of this kind without prior acceptance of a method. In the method which I propose to adopt, there are two elements with which some readers may disagree, and which had therefore better be clearly stated at the outset. To justify them fully would require volumes on their own, but here no more than a *rationale* can be sketched.

The first presupposition is that the evangelists are primarily christian teachers engaged in mediating the christian message. The christian message, like the jewish before it, is essentially grounded on historical events, but this does not make the evangelists historians – or at least not in the narrow sense of chroniclers, though we might call them historians of the good news of Christ.² Furthermore, the material which they pass on to us they had themselves received from the early communities, where it had been preserved and handed on because of its message. While it is naive and unfounded to maintain, as some do, that the early communities had their sights so firmly fixed on the fast approaching end of the world that they had no interest in history, it is equally false to insist that their interest in Christ's words and deeds was as keen historically as it was doctrinally. Since the communities were concerned with the stories of Jesus more for their message to christians than for their historical exactitude, we may expect that in their transmission, as in the telling of any story, the stories were adjusted to bring out to the maximum the message they contained, even at the price of factual exactitude. For example, if I say, in the course of a story, that a man 'drew himself up to his full height', it would be quite irrelevant to object that a man cannot change

¹ *The Way*, Vol 11, no. 4 (October, 1971), pp 324-30.

² Cf John L. McKenzie's excellent remarks on 'History', in his *Dictionary of the Bible* (London, 1965), p 360; and Xavier Léon-Dufour, *The Gospels and the Jesus of History* (London, 1968), pp 28-30.

his height. I am not talking about his height, but about the manner and emphasis of his reply – with his full dignity, measured tones, etc. One could object that my expression was historically inexact – and one would have missed my point. Anyone who wishes to bring out the point of an episode or series of episodes will select, compress or expand, change a phrase here and there, in order to make the speaker's meaning more obvious to the narrator's audience. He may, legitimately, even put words into his subject's mouth, to express succinctly and dramatically what would otherwise have required a flat and laborious explanation. These are the accepted norms of any storyteller, and we should not expect the gospel writers to have been preserved from (or deprived of) them.

The second presupposition is that Matthew and Luke use two sources of information, Mark and a collection of sayings of the Lord usually known as Q.³ (The latter source does not concern us because it was not used in the passages under discussion.) What in Matthew and Luke does not derive from these two sources is the result of their own editing. Each evangelist, like every christian, saw certain aspects of Christ and his message to be of paramount importance; and each, in his desire to teach the essential message of Christ, stressed particular aspects. It is this difference of emphasis, rather than different sources of information, which explains the minor variations in telling a story between Matthew and Luke (e.g. the centurion of Capernaum⁴). But consideration of the relationship between the gospels as a whole does exclude the possibility of Matthew and Luke having any other source of factual information which they used to cross-check or expand the narratives they received from Mark. Whether they had any narrative source about Jesus for the stories and, for example, the parables which they relate independently of Mark and Q, is more doubtful. It would certainly be strange if this source included only incidents omitted by Mark, or if they failed to use such a source because they had Mark as a source. A large number of incidents and parables can be explained by the Jewish technique of midrash,⁵ which Matthew certainly uses, for instance in the infancy narratives, and in recounting the death of Judas. Luke, for his part, has a recognizable predilection for presenting theological lessons in the form of a story (this is particularly clear in the Acts of the Apostles, e.g. in the story of Pentecost⁶). In some cases, the point of departure for the development can be clearly perceived. In any case, there are a number of instances where a story which is proper to Matthew or Luke is clearly elaborated by them without previous factual source.

A third presupposition must also be mentioned: that Mark's gospel

³ Cf Grant, F. C.: *The Gospels, their origin and their growth* (London, 1957), esp. pp 44 ff.

⁴ Cf Mt 8, 5 ff; Lk 7, 1 ff.

⁵ Midrash is a wide term, which includes the description of events by means of biblical references and allusions to past biblical events, in order to bring out their significance.

Cf McKenzie's *Dictionary of the Bible* s.v.

⁶ Cf Charlier, J. P.: *L'évangile de l'enfance de l'église* (Paris, 1966).

originally ended at 16,8. Although this is now generally accepted, it perhaps requires some explanation. The three alternative endings after that verse offered by various manuscripts are all unsatisfactory: the one for which there is most manuscript evidence is the longest; and this ending diverges very clearly from Mark's style and method, being in fact a concatenation of texts found elsewhere in the gospels and Acts. All three are the product of the feeling, derived by comparison with the other gospels, that there *must have been* something after verse 8. But firstly, it is difficult to envisage how this ending disappeared without leaving a trace in any manuscript or tradition. Secondly, if one prescind from the other gospels (which did not exist when Mark wrote), the ending seems perfectly satisfactory and complete at verse 8: the crucifixion-story is happily concluded with the angels's declaration of the resurrection. The gospel terminates on the beautifully open-ended and mysterious note of the awe of the women, which at the same time closes the incident because they do not give the message.

Matthew's view of the risen Lord

It was emphasized in the previous article that we can arrive at the truth about Jesus only through the evangelists. If they are wrong, we are lost. It is therefore of the first importance to discover their view of the resurrection rather than putting to them questions which cut across their train of thought. Matthew is the most straightforward of them, because his account points single-mindedly to the final incident on the mountain in Galilee. He makes some other minor changes in adopting Mark's narrative about the empty tomb, but the most noticeable is the speeding towards Galilee: the women in Matthew are to 'go quickly'⁷ to deliver the message to the apostles, which has a double, emphatic 'and behold' added (almost 'look here'). Far from being silenced by awe, they 'ran off' to tell the disciples, only to have their resolution strengthened by a vision of Jesus himself, who does no more than reinforce the same commission. Everything in Matthew, then, is hastening towards the mountain-top in Galilee.

At the same time Matthew does, of course, insist on the emptiness of the tomb with his story of the guards. He also insists that something supernatural happened, some divine intervention. This is the meaning of the earthquake which he inserts here, following the well-attested Old Testament and Jewish convention of describing a divine visitation by means of cosmic disturbances. So, as well as interpreting the meaning of the resurrection existentially, he also insists on its physical reality.

An existential interpretation is the purpose of the last paragraph of the gospel. It is clearly the composition of the evangelist himself, for it contains a very high proportion of words and expressions used by Matthew alone of the evangelists (at least seven in the four verses). In addition, many other

⁷ Mt 28, 7.

expressions used in the paragraph are characteristic of his style;⁸ so that it is indisputable that at least the bare bones of the story were composed by the evangelist. The two dominant themes – and so the substance of what Matthew wants to teach about the risen Lord – are the exaltation of Christ and the consequent missionary charge and promise. The two themes are interwoven, and exegetes vary about where the emphasis falls; but certainly it is in virtue of his exaltation, described in terms of Daniel's vision,⁹ 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me', that Christ sends his disciples on their universal mission and promises to be present always to his Church. This theme is a fitting climax to Matthew's gospel, arching over as it does from the first chapter, where the interpretation of Emmanuel, 'God with us', has an important place. And it is picked up again in the chapter on the community, 'Where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them',¹⁰ and by the frequent promise that what is done to missionaries or disciples of Christ is done also to him.¹¹

As far as Matthew is concerned, then, the existential interpretation proposed by the Bultmann school, 'Still he comes today',¹² does have a lot to recommend it. It brings out the double aspect of the power and presence of Christ now in his Church; this is indeed Matthew's final message. But there are two elements which we find to be lacking. One of these is the warrant of this presence, and the guarantee of its effectiveness which is given precisely by the mythological overtones of the reference to Daniel's vision of the Son of Man. When one is speaking of a situation which lies outside and above the realms of our normal everyday, humdrum experience, one must use some sort of symbolism. To fail to take this for what it is, is as short-sighted as the failure to understand poetic language as poetry. This language expresses something which is really there (just as poetry may express something about a situation which cannot be contained by prose). Granted that this language is symbolic rather than literal, there is nevertheless something real expressed symbolically by these assertions about Christ's position as lord of the universe. The other element stressed by Matthew which is lacking in the Bultmann approach is the empty tomb; to this we shall return.

The risen Lord according to Luke

Different as are Luke's post-resurrection stories from those of Matthew, there is yet a remarkable similarity in their teaching. One feels that when he wrote them, Luke already had the Acts of the Apostles in mind. If any theme is prominent in the Acts, it is missionary preaching, and this is the theme stressed by Luke's narratives.

He also makes quite deliberately a highly significant geographical adjustment. His stories are all in or around Jerusalem, in accordance with his

⁸ Cf Kilpatrick, G. D.: *The Origins of the Gospel according to St Matthew* (Oxford, 1946), pp 48 ff.

⁹ Dan 7, 13 ff.

¹⁰ Mt 18, 20.

¹¹ Lk 9, 48; 10, 16.

¹² Cf *The Way*, *loc. cit.*, pp 325-6.

scheme which makes Jerusalem pivotal in the gospel. The later part of his gospel, from 9,51 onwards, is the journey up to Jerusalem, where Jesus must accomplish his death (all other place-names are rigorously excluded to avoid distraction). Similarly, the pattern of Acts¹³ is the gradual spread of the gospel in ever-widening circles out from Jerusalem. This is perhaps one way in which Luke expresses the importance of charity and Church unity: the churches remain always careful of their unity with the mother-church of Jerusalem. Perhaps it is also another way of stressing the pivotal nature of Christ's death and resurrection which made Jerusalem the centre of the Church. But possibly more significant than the theology behind the change is the way in which the change itself is operated. In Mark he read: 'He will go before you *into Galilee*; there you will see him *as he said to you*'.¹⁴ Luke must have been aware that there were traditions of appearance in Galilee which fulfilled this promise; they are recorded in Matthew and John.¹⁵ Yet in order to ignore them, Luke changes the angel's words to 'Remember what *he said to you* when he was still *in Galilee*':¹⁶ omitting the promise made in Gethsemane, yet providing no corresponding saying during the galilean ministry. If history is no more than the exact recording of the minutiae of events, this can only be described as deliberate falsification of history. Such treatment shows, however, that it is not in the details of historical circumstance but in the salvific content of the lesson of events that the interest of the evangelist lies. If the evangelists can be described as historians at all, it is as historians of a person and of his message; it is their business to convey a faithful record of his whole personality, rather than of each event for itself. And any attempt to splice the narratives of the different gospels into a single smooth-running newsreel is not the task of one who wishes to come nearer to the mind of the writers.

As we have said, Luke views the resurrection primarily as the starting-point of the christian mission. Missionary preaching begins already with the angels of the resurrection, whose purpose is to interpret the event. (Why does he change Mark's single angel into two? Is it fanciful to connect this with the sending out of the disciples on their mission in pairs?¹⁷) Their message is already couched in terms which will become familiar in the missionary discourses of the Acts.¹⁸ Even more striking is the example of missionary preaching given by the risen Lord himself, which forms the centre-piece of the journey to Emmaus.¹⁹ Here the risen Christ instructs the two disciples with much the same method, proof from scripture, as is used in the Acts, and often in the same words. Particularly clear is the parallel with Philip's evangelization of the courtier in Acts.²⁰ And as in the Acts preaching leads

¹³ Cf Acts 1, 8.

¹⁴ Mk 16, 7, referring to the promise made in Gethsemane - Mk 14, 28.

¹⁵ Mt 28, 16ff.; Jn 21.

¹⁶ Lk 24, 6.

¹⁷ Lk 10, 1.

¹⁸ Lk 24, 7; Cf Acts 2, 23-24; 3, 13-15; 13, 30 etc.

¹⁹ Lk 24, 13-31.

²⁰ Acts 8, 26-40.

on to a sacrament, so here; only in the Acts it leads on to baptism, which would be inappropriate for those who are already disciples and who therefore join the Lord in the eucharist. Thus the risen Lord is for Luke the model of the christian preacher.

The last two paragraphs of the gospel are also unmistakably a preparation for the life of the Church as described in the Acts. Jesus this time teaches the assembled disciples, again in the same style and language, before sending them out as his representatives to do the same. And finally he departs, leaving them with a solemn blessing for their task.

Luke, therefore, like Matthew, is not content merely to sit back and wonder at the risen Lord. The resurrection is not just an event which happened in the past. They insist that the risen Lord has a permanent message. This Matthew expresses by the command to make disciples and baptize, in the strength of the promise of continual presence given by him who holds all power in heaven and on earth. Luke expresses the same missionary concern by means of the triple model of the apostolic kerygma and the final command and blessing. In both cases it is the lasting influence and active power of the risen Lord in his Church that comes to the fore: 'Still he comes today'.

But in Luke, just as in Matthew, there is also the stress on the bodily reality of the resurrection. Matthew stresses the emptiness of the tomb by his story of the guards: a polemic against those who claimed that his body had been stolen. Luke answers a different charge, that it was not a real, physical body. This is the point of Jesus showing his hands and his feet and being given something to eat, with the explicit mention that he ate the piece of fish 'before their eyes'.

The message of Mark

Of the synoptic writers, Mark is the most primitive and the simplest. As his one episode is shared by the more developed evangelists, it has been convenient to defer its discussion till now, after the tendencies of the others have been examined. The story of the empty tomb is of course the rock of scandal for those who would hold that the stories of the risen Christ are the result of an already-existing faith in his presence now, rather than the cause of it. Indeed we have seen that the main drive of the other stories is to explain the mode and effect of the presence in the Church of the risen Christ. That the message is given by means of these stories could indeed be a poetical way of teaching such truths, resulting from a conviction of his presence. But the Bultmann theory of 'a series of subjective visions' is brought up short against the story of the empty tomb: a story which, moreover, determines the modality of all the others. If the early christians had not been convinced of its truth, they would have expressed these same lessons about the presence of Christ in the Church, and his command to it, in a different way.

There are two ways of disposing of the story of the empty tomb which deserve notice. The first has already been mentioned; the idea of resurrec-

tion was 'a later development'.²¹ As we have already remarked, such a statement can be made only in bland disregard of the oldest credal formula we possess.²² Paul claims to have learnt this formula himself and taught it to his corinthian converts, presumably as part of their elementary instruction, in the year 51-52 A. D. This is, by quite a large margin, the earliest date we can give to any christian statement. What is, however, true is that Paul shows no awareness of the story of the empty tomb; so that the way is open for saying that the first basis, chronologically, for belief in the resurrection was the experience of the risen Lord appearing to the witnesses cited in first corinthians.²³ (But it should be noted that the appearances are bodily ones: he can be 'seen', a fact which is hardly stressed by the demythologizing school). But it is true only that the way is open; the conclusion does not impose itself. An alternative explanation for citing these witnesses to the risen Christ rather than telling the story of the empty tomb is that it would be both more convincing and more apt theologically. More apt theologically, because the empty tomb is of no account if the risen Christ does not make his presence felt, while the reverse is not true; more convincing, because the testimony of a few overwrought women is so patently weak. Bultmann and his followers seem to have no difficulty in simply writing the story off as legend: 'The stories of the empty tomb, of which Paul has no knowledge yet, are legends'.²⁴ 'The late origin of the pericope about the tomb is already suggested by its legendary character'.²⁵ They base everything on Paul's silence, interpreting this to mean that he did not know the story, without considering the possibility that he deliberately passes it over because the witness of women has no validity in jewish law; and because he can also prove his point by the testimony of the apostles, the authorized witnesses to the resurrection. Paradoxically, the very weakness of the story is an argument in favour of its basic historicity.

The second way of disposing of the story of the empty tomb is less crude, since it does at least set out to explain how the stories arose. To the total jewish anthropology it was inconceivable that a person could have any non-bodily existence. But it was clear that Jesus continued to exist and act. Therefore he must have a body, which he could have in no other way than by resuming the body which lay in the tomb. The story of the empty tomb, and the stories of Jesus being touched and eating, are the result of this basically philosophical presupposition that non-bodily life is impossible. (Marxsen perhaps follows the same line of thought when he dismisses the evidence of the story thus: 'The message of the resurrection, which already exists as a formula, is therefore re-interpreted in visual terms'.²⁶ It will be clear from the final paragraphs of our previous article that modern science in no way

²¹ *The Way*, loc. cit., p 327.

²² 1 Cor 15, 4.

²³ 1 Cor 15.

²⁴ Bultmann, R.: *Theologie des NT* (Tübingen, 1965), p 48.

²⁵ Grass, H.: *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte* (Göttingen, 1956), p 23.

²⁶ Marxsen, W.: *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (London, 1970), p 161.

rules out the possibility that Jesus *could* have had some sort of bodily existence even if his body had remained in the tomb. But is it so clear that the earliest christians could not have realized this? Is it so certain that they would have had to invent an empty tomb to explain their experience of a bodily risen Christ?

Two factors suffice to create at least uncertainty on this point. The earliest christians were well aware that Christ's body was not the same in all respects as it had been before his death. Not only could it pass through locked doors, but it was so altered as to be recognizable only with difficulty and that to the eyes of love (this trait emerges most clearly in John, both in the case of the Magdalen and of the apostle on the lake, but it can be perceived also in the story of the disciples at Emmaus). More especially, we may not wholly agree with Professor Lampe's view that Paul's arguments about the risen body²⁷ exclude the continuity of the risen body with that of the earthly.²⁸ Nevertheless, the situation is not such that Paul would clearly have to invent a story of an empty tomb if he were to continue to hold the bodily resurrection of Christ. And if Paul would not need to, why should other early christians?

In any case, with the claim that the story of the empty tomb was invented later for apologetic reasons, in order to answer the charge that Christ was not really risen, we come to a parting of the ways. Confronted with such a story – or indeed with any other part of the gospel tradition – it is the automatic reaction of the Bultmann school to ask why this was written.²⁹ On the supposition that the gospel tradition was created to serve the needs of the preaching and teaching community, the hypothesis that the event actually occurred is entertained only as a remote (and rather irrelevant) possibility. This is an inevitable result of their presuppositions about faith being necessarily a leap in the dark, and the darker the better. Another school of exegesis would prefer – to put it at its weakest – to grant that there is a *prima facie* likelihood that there is at least some event behind a gospel story.

It is, of course, possible to hold that some stories were created by the evangelist on a very slender basis. It has frequently been suggested, for example, that some of the miracle stories in Matthew were composed in reliance on the generalized memory that Jesus was a wonder-worker.³⁰ Certainly – the comparison with Matthew makes it plain – Luke simply inserts without factual warrant miracles in connection with the messengers from John the Baptist,³¹ or rather transfers them to this occasion because of the general knowledge of Jesus' cures. Similarly, the story of the flight into Egypt is so clearly and minutely modelled on the infancy of Moses that it is

²⁷ 1 Cor 15.

²⁸ *The Way*, *loc. cit.*, pp 328–9.

²⁹ This is particularly clear in the volume of essays *The Future of our Religious Past*, ed. Robinson, J. M. (London, 1971), esp chs 7 and 8.

³⁰ Cf Fuller, R. H.: *Interpreting the Miracles* (London, 1963), p 86.

³¹ Lk 7, 21.

far more likely that Matthew is working from the stories of Moses' infancy than from memories of that of Jesus.

But there is a clear difference of literary type and emphasis between these examples and the narrative of the empty tomb. In some cases, the core may be almost entirely scriptural, to show that Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament by re-incarnating its great prophets: Moses in the flight into Egypt, Elijah and Elisha in the raising of the widow's son at Naim.³² But in all cases there is some discernible basis on which the evangelist is building, other than the mere need for apologetic reasons to assert that it happened. It is a guess, unsubstantiated by solid parallels and therefore unscientific, to assert that the story is 'the message of the resurrection . . . interpreted in visual terms', 'the proclamation . . . is externalized in the reference to the empty tomb'.³³ A further difference is the uniqueness of this event. If it were proved that one or other of the miracle-stories were entirely invented – the message of the wonder-worker interpreted in visual terms, this would still be acceptable as the further repetition of a message already shown, adding nothing new. Yet another difference is the fact that this narrative is one of the very few that is given by all four evangelists, and accorded a central position. The differences between the synoptic accounts and John are signs of some elaboration; but they are, at the same time, proof of the strength of the tradition of the empty tomb and the appearance to women there.

To sum up, then, the arguments against the claim that the story of the empty tomb was invented for apologetic reasons: the earliest known christian credal formula shows the christians already believing in a visible risen Christ; nevertheless it is not clear that this would necessarily involve an empty tomb, so that it would not have been necessary to invent such a story. Secondly, as a proof, the story is weak, for the testimony of women is invalid in jewish law. If the christians were inventing a story to prove a point which was the key-stone of their message, they might have been expected to invent a better one. Thirdly, on a point of method, in spite of all the qualifications made at the beginning of this article about historical exactitude, strong evidence is required for the assertion that such a central story, common to all the gospels, is a complete fabrication, and not simply an interpreted version to which at least *some* event stands as factual basis and point of departure. Analyses of how some narratives have been elaborated from a core have been attempted with varying success; but here there is supposed to be no factual core.

The core of history which is preserved in all the versions is only the emptiness of the tomb; that is the basic and central assertion of the incident. About the circumstances there is wide divergence even between the synoptics: was it getting light or after sunrise (Matthew v. Mark)? Was Salome there or not (Mark v. Matthew)? Did they come to anoint the body or just to visit the tomb (Mark and Luke v. Matthew)? Was there an earthquake

³² Lk 7, 1 ff.

³³ Marxsen, *op. cit.*, pp 161, 163.

(Matthew alone)? Was there one angel or two (Matthew and Mark v. Luke)? Did the women deliver the message or not (Matthew v. Mark and Luke)? Did Jesus himself appear (Matthew alone)? By scrutinizing the differences and similarities between the evangelists, we can discover what they found central and how they set about interpreting it.

The message of Mark in this, his only post-resurrection story, has a fine simplicity. It is not apologetic, for there is no statement that the women – feeble witnesses in any case, as we have already pointed out – check the angel's words. The first stress is on the atmosphere of awe and reverence engendered by the whole affair, for this is the sense of their stunned fear which is their reaction to the angel and their final attitude. Mark wants to leave this final, mysterious impression ringing at the end of his gospel: the awful power of God is at work. The second stress is provided by the angel's message. The *angelus interpres* is a recognized convention of Jewish literature, in the later books of the Old Testament and in non-biblical writings as well as the New Testament (e.g. the angels of the ascension); they are the bearers of the divine message, the interpreters of an otherwise puzzling state of affairs. We must regard the angel's message here as related directly to Jesus' prediction that he would go before them into Galilee.³⁴ In the garden of Gethsemane this promise occurs at the same time as, and in spite of, the prediction that the disciples, and in particular Peter, will desert the Lord during his passion. The announcement here, therefore, again with particular reference to Peter, conveys a certain reconciliation and forgiveness. The same is to be understood from the greeting 'Do not be afraid'; in the bible, this is always the greeting given to the favoured beneficiary of a divine vision. The message is, then, that in spite of the awe rightly caused by these supernatural happenings, the disciples are the favoured friends of the risen Lord, and are to rejoin him in his power and mission.

Even in this short account of Mark, therefore, the story of the resurrection is no mere *Historie* but is *Geschichte*, fraught with existential import. Here again, the message for the Church of today is carried by the events of the past, not merely by the faith of the first Christians. It was the events which gave rise to the faith, not the faith to the stories.³⁵

Henry Wansbrough O.S.B.

³⁴ Mk 14, 28.

³⁵ John's resurrection narratives will be considered in a further article.