

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:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

entirely absent from the Anglo-Catholicism of to-day. When Lord Halifax, in his evidence, can say that the Church of England to-day is "the same Church, not merely by a legal continuity, but in all essentials of doctrine and practice, as the Church of St. Gregory and St. Augustine," we are surely face to face with a contention that is absolutely foreign to anything found in the Church of England before the Tractarian Movement arose. It is this wide distinction between the present day and the period of Hooker and Andrewes that constitutes one of the chief reasons why the Royal Commission was found to be necessary. We may fearlessly challenge anyone to find the practices referred to in the first recommendation of the Royal Commission in any representative Church writings before Tractarian times. We go farther, and do not hesitate to say that there are no practices observed generally by the Caroline divines, of which any Evangelical would say what the Royal Commission says about these Roman practices—that they "should receive no toleration." This is the one simple way of testing true Anglo-Catholicism.



The Ascension as Fact.¹

BY THE RIGHT REV: THE LORD BISHOP OF DURHAM.

THERE is a strong tendency at present to detach spiritual truth from its embodiment in historical fact, and to present to thought and faith an "essence" of Christianity supposed to be equally valuable whether or no such and such alleged events ever occurred. The Scripture story of our Lord's Ascension, in such a system, will be taken to be the transitory envelope of permanent ideas. It grew as poetic halo around the idea of His transcendent supremacy and victory, after death,

¹ A lecture delivered at Durham, July 26, 1906, before the members of the "Summer Term for Biblical Study."

in the unseen ; it bodied forth that idea to the souls of men in the past, and made it current coin. It served thus a great purpose. But we are now mature enough to do without the envelope, while we retain its contents. As event, the Ascension may never have occurred ; probably it never did occur ; but it is everlasting as idea.

The theory can be stated plausibly, and even attractively, from some points of view. But it is obvious on reflection that it involves some very serious sacrifices, to say the least, and that to accept it as a lightening of religious difficulties may prove a ruinous bargain.

It cannot be held without discarding *ipso facto* (as I hope to show presently) a quite primeval belief of the Church, and essaying in that measure to reconstruct to our minds the very origin of the faith. It cannot be held without discrediting in the most serious degree the capacity of the first believers to see, to perceive, and to transmit. It involves the disparagement of *the unique* aspect of Christianity, under which it appears as not, like other beliefs, an effort of humanity towards the invisible, but a coming forth of the invisible, in abnormal and gracious action, towards humanity—in short, a revelation, which is the antithesis of a speculation.

Further, we can scarcely accept the theory that the Ascension need not be taken as an event, without some detachment of the question of its "historicity" from the great *ensemble* of the Person and work of our Lord ; as if the Ascension were a separable phenomenon, standing or falling by itself, with its circle of alleged proofs.

This last reflection deserves our special attention. Always, in the study of the Gospel story, it is a sure road to fallacy to detach the links of the chain of mysteries, and to examine each link singly with its evidence. Take the Nativity alone, or the Temptation, or the Transfiguration, or a given miracle, and it is easy to say that the normal tendency of religions in their development is to cast a glamour of imagined wonders round their founders. But when we weigh the chain as a whole, and

include in its texture the consideration of the character, the person, of this particular Founder, the applicability of the remark quickly diminishes. We observe that the "Founder" appears in all the accounts of Him before us as altogether unique, not only in His alleged surroundings and achievements, but very far more in Himself; and this raises a presumption of the truth of unique elements in His story. We observe further that a peculiar character attaches not only to Him, but to the record in which alone we have Him represented to us. Take, for example, the Third Gospel, and examine its literary quality. Its author was, quite evidently, not a man to create, to imagine, to poetize, but rather to inquire and to narrate. He is an "honest chronicler" by disposition, and modern research, as we all know, has largely affirmed his success in that character, particularly in his "second volume," the Acts, where materials for testing him are abundant. Well, consider afresh this writer's picture of Jesus Christ in the depth and greatness of its moral majesty; look, as you study it, "not on the trees so much as on the forest"; take in at large the impression of a Character which assuredly was immeasurably beyond *the invention* of the painstaking, modest writer, and which reason accordingly, quite as much as faith, recommends us to accept as photographed from fact, not composed from artistic resources.

In this light, the light of the Character, the Person, we approach from a view-point at once high and safe the narratives in the Third Gospel—for example, the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Infancy, the Resurrection.

That supreme alleged event, the Resurrection, for the purposes of this paper, I take largely for granted. But we may briefly recall the vastness of the evidence for it—the sudden rise of the small Christian circle from abject depression to a moral height and force (observe the supremely moral character) altogether without precedent in the world, and resting altogether on the basis of the complete triumph of the Crucified over death; a rise which is the sole ultimate *raison d'être*, in history, of the Christian Church to-day. Observe (what will be illustrated

by contrast later) the restraint and moderation of the narratives; the prosaic precautions taken to guard the tomb; the condition of things ascertained when it was visited and found open; the total failure of opponents, which cannot reasonably be questioned, to produce the lifeless Body in confutation of its resurrection; the wealth of self-substantiating power in such a narrative as that of Emmaus. Observe, on a yet higher plane, the transformation in character of the disciples—a change so great, so vast, not only in their new courage but quite as much in their new wisdom, insight, and sober elevation of thought. Observe the apostolic Epistles (which on any showing—at least, as to the great mass of them—are now admitted to be extremely early Christian literature), and see how everywhere in them the Resurrection is obviously assumed as a fact supremely certain and dominant, lying amply within living memory, yet embracing things eternal in its significance. Place these evidences in contact with the phenomenon of the Church of Christ, and above all with the phenomenon of the Gospel portrait and Person of Christ, and may we not repose upon the fact-character of the corporeal Resurrection, undisturbed by the fathomless mysteries which surround it?

The Lord rose, then, not in spirit only, but in body. He rose with such continuity that He bore the scars of His death, and that He was known by look and voice; with such non-continuity that He transcended the limitations—not of laws of thought, as He would have done if He had been present bodily in two places at one time, but (a very different thing)—of material barriers as they are known to us in our present physical state. Such was the texture of His now perfectly spirit-wielded frame that the stone door, or the wooden door, was to it like a wide pervious network. This was wonderful; but was it more incredible than that material tissues, perfectly opaque under normal conditions, should prove transparent under the “Röntgen ray”?

He was “raised, a spiritual body”; “flesh and bones,” while no longer “flesh and blood.”

Well, and what does all this intimate as to the Ascension? Granted a Resurrection, corporeal, in a body spiritual, while not spirit, and what then? What should the future of such a body be, fitly, congruously, probably? That it should die again and be buried is fairly inconceivable. That it should continue to reside, immortal in a mortal world, spiritual in a "natural" world, is a conception only less difficult to entertain, and which reasonably requires large evidence if it is to be allowed. That it should merely melt into its elements and be no more, seems to leave its first existence without a reason. Surely the supremely fit sequel to its passage at Resurrection into spiritual conditions is its transition, thus transfigured, into the super-terrestrial life. From that life the Lord had come, in grace to man, to "take man on Him, to deliver" (*ad liberandum suscepturus hominem*). His return to that life, embodied but glorified, was it not the one "natural" sequel of Resurrection, in the deepest sense of "natural"?

That transition is of course surrounded by difficulties of belief; and what great proposition to thought is not? But Luther said truly that "faith, to be faith indeed, must crucify the word *how*." Not the word *why*, let us observe, but the word *how*. Faith rightly asks for a warrant; but, given the warrant, faith as such should, *and will always more or less*, dispense with a complete account of process.

Meanwhile, the "difficulties of belief" in this case are very largely difficulties of imagination; and imagination, a noble faculty at its proper work, is off its ground when it attempts to collect *the really unknown* into shapes and pictures. Is the unknown guaranteed to faith by God in His Word? Then imagination does right to rest passive outside the door till God shall open it.

It may be helpful, meantime, outside that door, to remember that we are realizing more and ever more in our time that our very notions of matter are all surrounded with mystery. Also, let us reflect that our experience in all its ranges is conditioned not only by the object perceived but by the subject perceiving.

We muse upon heaven, and ask ourselves whether it is place as well as state, and perplex ourselves with instant and obvious difficulties in the attempt to *imagine* its "locality." As we are conditioned now, it may be that the final bliss, if presented to us unveiled, could not be known as locally conditioned. But as we may be conditioned for perception then, in "that world and the resurrection of the dead," it is abundantly possible that a supreme impression of locality, of "here" and "there," of being "together with Him" and "together with them," may prove to be not only natural, but inevitable. "It doth not yet appear;" that is all. So let no difficulties of unlicensed imagination disturb our faith in the veritable Ascension, in His spiritual body, of our risen Lord.

From these considerations we may turn direct to the original account of the Ascension, and to the original belief about it in the Christian Church; and this not at any length, for the material lies in the hands of every reader of the Bible. For an account of the Ascension we turn to Acts i. 1-11. We need not for our present purpose do more than to allude to other narratives. It is enough to point in passing to Luke xxiv. 50-53, so interesting for comparison with the same writer's developed narrative in the Acts, and to Mark xvi. 19, in that much-discussed last paragraph of the second Gospel—a paragraph which I feel fairly sure is a primeval written summary of the post-Resurrection story *adopted by the Evangelist* as it stood, for the close of his work, and so, very probably, the oldest piece of writing in the four Gospels. And we may recall how St. Matthew *implies* a heavenly exaltation of the Lord where (xxvi. 64) he records His words before the Sanhedrin: "Ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven"; and so St. John (vi. 62, xx. 17): "What if ye shall see the Son of man going up where He was before?" "I ascend unto my Father and your Father." But the first page of the Acts is our main authority. Let the reader take it up again, and note as he reads that tone of the "honest chronicler" of which we spoke above. Observe the quietness

of the narrative, the question and answer about the prophetic future, the Lord's deprecation of curiosity, and His insistence upon the practical witnessing-mission of His followers, the local particulars, the reserved *prose* of the account of the actual departure, the calm and friendly words of the "two *men*"—just two, and seen simply as men, in shining raiment, speaking only to animate a "blessed hope," and to send the Eleven back to Jerusalem in the power of it. Is not this narrative precisely in the manner of fact, precisely not in the manner of dreaming enthusiasm?

To deepen that impression as to its quality, let the reader peruse, in contrast, almost any passage of the "Apocryphal Gospels"—in their accounts, for example, of the Nativity or of the Resurrection. Take the "Gospel of the Infancy" (printed *e.g.*, by Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*). There the cave is illuminated by a light beyond the sun; Symeon in the Temple sees the infant Lord in His mother's arms shining like a pillar of glory and surrounded by angels; the star of the wise men is an angel disguised; as the Infant enters Egypt idols fall before him. Or take the "Narrative of Joseph of Arimathæa." The penitent thief on the cross sees the Lord adored by angels; he addresses Him in a long rhetorical speech, and is similarly answered, and is sent, in death, with a *written message* to the Cherubim of Paradise, to be received there by them, and there, in an immortal body, to dwell alone. Joseph, coming to the crosses, finds the body of Demas (the penitent) gone, and that of Gestas (the impenitent) turned into a dragon. In Galilee the Lord appears in sun-bright glory, and the thief in royal splendour at His side.

A remarkable example of this style of narrative is seen in the "Gospel of Peter," discovered in 1886 at Akhmim, and presented in a form handy for English readers, with short but suggestive introductory matter, by Messrs. James and Robinson (now respectively Provost of King's College, Cambridge, and Dean of Westminster). The "Gospel" may be as early as A.D. 140, and it displays features of extreme interest, as a docu-

ment of Docetic "tendency." But its importance for us now lies in its *gigantesque* style of narrative. The watchers at the tomb of the Lord see issuing from it, on the third day, three stupendous figures, two attending the Third to the right and left. The stature of the two reaches the sky; that of the Third, the Lord, transcends it. The cross, with a life and a motion of its own, follows after them; and so on.

I know no more effectual means for quickening a perception of the historical trustworthiness of the canonical Gospels than, first, a perusal of such passages (found in writings emanating from circles no more imaginative and "Oriental" in themselves than those of the Apostolic Church, and dating, broadly speaking, from the same age of the world), and then, at once, a perusal of this same first paragraph of the Acts or the first few chapters of St. Luke. The impression in the canonical narratives of an absolute and majestic *sanity*, deepened, not disturbed, by the *authentic* supernatural, is then felt to be great beyond description.

So we read of the Ascension in narrative, and then we turn to it as an article of primeval belief, opening the Acts and the Epistles for the purpose. Again, in the Acts, the "honest chronicler" shows us the apostolic company (i. 24) praying to the exalted Christ; the dying martyr (vii. 55-59) beholding Him, in His Manhood, on the throne, glorified; the alarmed persecutor (ix. 3, 4, and parallels, including 1 Cor. xv. 8) seeing His bodily presence and hearing His voice in articulate utterance—utterance so strangely, so sublimely, *homely* as to be its own warrant of authenticity. We have Peter at Pentecost (ii. 33, 34) and at the Temple gate (iii. 21) proclaiming Him, or in an equally impressive implication *assuming* Him, to be "at the right hand of God," "ascended into the heavens," "received by the heavens." In Epistle after Epistle the Lord is present to writer and to readers as perfectly well known to be "seated at the right hand of God," "in heaven," "gone into heaven," "far above all heavens," "in the heavenly places"; and so that the whole faith and hope of the Church is bent upon His return

from thence—"from heaven we look for the Saviour," we "wait for Him from heaven," "the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven," "to them that look for Him shall He appear the second time, without sin unto salvation" (see, *e.g.*, Rom. viii. 24; Eph. i. 20; Phil. iii. 20; Col. iii. 2; 1 Thess. i. 10, iv. 16; 2 Thess. i. 7; Heb. ix. 28; 1 Pet. iii. 22). Two whole books of the New Testament, the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Revelation, may be said so to postulate the Ascension as the antecedent to every doctrine and every prophecy that each book is one long, pregnant, majestic reference to it throughout.

No wonder that the earliest embryos of a formulated Creed of the Church, outside the New Testament, include the Ascension among the foundation facts of the faith of Christ. To the primeval Church it was an event as concrete, as public, as assured, as the Death and the Resurrection.

I attempt no elaborate *envoi* or "application." My aim has been to set forth some of the reasons, general and particular, for a firm and thoughtful tenacity in regard of the fact-aspect of the Ascension of our ever-blessed Risen Lord. Such a tenacity, rightly maintained—that is to say, in love and in prayer—will be no *mere* confession of an article. It will pass into our lives; it will shed the light of a living and veritable heavenliness, from the exalted Son of man, upon our present hour; it will hallow every thought of the body; it will reduce to its minimum the shadow of death; it will give a substance, at once ethereal and concrete, to "that blessed hope." For "this same Jesus shall so come, in like manner, as He was seen going into heaven."

