

The Meaning of Christ's Charge to Mary Magdalene in St. John xx. 17.

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FEW passages in the New Testament have given occasion to more divergent interpretations or wilder suggestions than this. The view put forth in the present article is simple, and it may almost be affirmed that no one would have thought of any other but for some ulterior object, either to find support for unbelief in our Lord's Resurrection, or to make the language fit some theory, whether a true or a false one. The interpretation offered is not new, but it is one which has not had justice done to it,¹ as those who have put it forth have not done so in a manner so carefully reasoned as to give it a fair chance to emerge from the mass of verbiage with which the interpretation of the passage has been encumbered. Some of this latter is misleading owing to the very truth and beauty of the ideas which inspired it. But an idea may be both beautiful and true in itself, and yet not applicable in a particular reference; and an attempt will here be made to disentangle the passage from the webs which commentators have spun over it, and to let the words speak for themselves.

The reading in the original does not present any difficulty. It runs: *Λέγει αὐτῇ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Μὴ μου ἅπτου, οὐπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα· πορεύου δὲ πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου, καὶ εἰπὲ αὐτοῖς, Ἐναβαίνω πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου καὶ πατέρα ὑμῶν καὶ Θεόν μου καὶ Θεὸν ὑμῶν.* "Jesus saith to her: Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended unto the Father: but go unto My brethren, and say to them, I ascend unto My Father and your Father, and My God and your God" (R.V.).

1. In the first place, there is no authority at all for altering

¹ For the purposes of this article I have relied upon Godet, Tholuck, and Luthardt, and especially upon Stier, who has accumulated a great wealth of material for the statement of the views of the German commentators cited on this passage.

the reading, *Μή μου ἅπτου*, in any of the ways that have been suggested, as we shall see later, all which readings are bad Greek and none of which make any sense.

2. Again, *ἅπτου*, it is commonly agreed by scholars, means, not "touch," but "hold." The force of the saying is not *noli me tangere*, but *noli mihi adhaerere*; the idea being not that of mere physical contact with our Lord, but of persistent clinging to Him. The present tense shows that Mary Magdalene had already fallen at His feet, and was embracing them when He spoke to her.

3. *μου* occupies the position of emphasis, and consequently is contrasted with *τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου*. To read the sentence, marking the emphasis on these words, respectively, is to obtain a clue to the meaning of the whole.

4. The *γὰρ*, as is usual with this word, is the pivot of the sentence. It implies that what follows is the reason for what precedes it; in other words, that the ground upon which Mary is told not to continue to cling to Jesus is that He is not yet ascended.

5. The *πορεύου δὲ πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου* is plainly the latter of two alternative courses, and the one to be adopted by Mary in place of the former.

These considerations sweep a whole world of confusion out of the way of a simple and reasonable interpretation of the words before us.

The views of the passage that have been put forth by commentators may be classified under the following heads:

I. The German Sceptical View.

II. The Mystical View, largely adopted in England.

III. The View which treats the words as communicating a Special Mission to Mary.

I. The German Sceptical School has several subdivisions. The attacks of some of these upon the Greek text are simply brutal. Stier points out that, for example, Gerdroff calmly erased the *μή*, leaving simply *μου ἅπτου*, as though it were a command instead of a prohibition; Schulthess and Lucke con-

verted $\mu\eta$ into $\sigma\acute{\upsilon}$, which has a similar effect ; Vogel wrote $\mu\eta\ \sigma\acute{\upsilon}\ \acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omicron\upsilon$, that is, "Do not be afraid to touch me" ; while the unconscionable Bauldri made it $\mu\eta\ \mu\omicron\upsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omicron\upsilon$, which, beside being intended to convey unbelief, is gross nonsense. All these alterations of the text fall to the ground for want of manuscript support, from their offence against grammar, and from their own inherent absurdity.

The manifest purpose of this school is to gather from our Lord's words some colour for their unbelief in His Resurrection. Paulus would make Him mean, "Do not touch My wounds, which still smart ; you will hurt Me" ; which, of course, implies that He had never died at all. In the same sense agree Venturini and Bennecke. Schleirmacher grants that He had risen from the dead, but His new life will not as yet bear to be touched, the process of glorification being not yet complete ; a strange and hardly intelligible suggestion. Olshausen's view is the same, somewhat spiritualized ; to touch Him would disturb the process of glorification. Wetstein understands the words as a caution not to incur defilement by touching one who has been in the tomb—a shocking suggestion, abhorrent to every devout mind. Some affirm that our Lord is forbidding Mary to touch Him as He was still incorporeal, among whom Luthardt cites Weisse and Hilgenfeld. It will be plainly seen that this view involves a denial of the Resurrection, as, if our Lord were still incorporeal, His body was not risen. Hilgenfeld says that the $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi$ is useless, which practically denies the resurrection of the body.

No less irreverent is the view of those who suggest that our Lord is repelling Mary's touch as being one of sensuous passion and contrary to decorum. Stier quoted the Berlenberg Bible and Richter's Family Bible. Hengstenberg takes the same view, which Tholuck attributes even to Chrysostom and Luther ; while Krummacher, as quoted by Stier, says : "The Lord repels sentimentality," which is only a shade less bad. It is impossible to think that Mary Magdalene had one grain either of **passion** or of mere sentiment in her devotion to her Lord.

Another class of writers are those who represent Mary Magdalene as desiring to convince herself of the reality of our Lord, and as being put back by Him with an assurance that actual proof is unnecessary. Among these, according to Luthardt, Godet, and Tholuck, are Meyer, Baumgarten, Crusius, Neander (probably) and Fikenschcr. It is as much as to say, "There is no need to put Me to the test of touch : I have not yet left the earth and become glorified ; I am still really corporeal." This, it will be noticed, is the precise opposite to the statement that He was not to be touched because He was incorporeal. It is a *non sequitur*, since, if our Lord were not pure spirit, He would be proved corporeal by touch, as He, in fact, invited His disciples to test on a later occasion. The argument He actually employed to them was, "Handle Me and see ; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see Me have," which is the very opposite of the reason He is supposed by these writers to be giving to Mary.

Others, again, say that Christ here forbids Mary to worship Him, because He was not yet ascended. Godet, Stier, and Tholuck, refer to the following as representatives of this view : Lucke, Hingenfeld, Kypke, Herder, Less, Kühnöl, Tholuck, Meyer, Hass, Sepp, Pfaff, Camero. But, beside the fact that the passage contains no interdict against *worship* at all, our Lord had accepted worship previous to His passion, and therefore, *a fortiori*, He would not refuse it after His Resurrection, and, as a matter of fact, He did accept it after His Resurrection, from the women first and later from the eleven disciples in Galilee (Matt. xxviii. 9, 17). Moreover, worship was offered to and accepted by Him, not on the ground of His Ascension, but on that of His Divinity. Hence this view falls to the ground.

There are those, again, who suppose that our Lord means that He is in haste to ascend to His Father, and cannot brook delay. For this opinion Godet and Luthardt cite Kinkel, Baur, Köstlin, Lutterbeck, and Neander. It, at least, does not absolutely contradict and stultify the language of the context as other views do. But one consideration is fatal to it, namely,

that, so far as we are informed, He did not ascend for forty days. Still less does the passage afford any support to the idea that He had already, on the Resurrection morning, effected a preliminary Ascension and returned to earth again. The words *οὐπω ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα* would seem enough to negative this view, which is devoid of any positive support.

II. We now come to the Mystical View. This may be stated thus: At the moment of speaking our Lord, not being yet ascended, was corporeal, and not spiritual; hence, Mary Magdalene must be content to wait for His Ascension, and not to think of clinging to Him till then, when she would be able to do so spiritually. This view is supported by so many and such eminent and devout expositors that it deserves a most respectful as well as a most careful consideration. If we may trust our authorities, Tholuck, Godet, and Stier, it is the view taken by Augustine and Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theophylact, and Euthymius; by Calvin, Melancthon, and Grotius; by Lampe, Olshausen (?), Neander, Godet, De Wette, Gerlach, Justin, Stier, Photius, Pfenningen, Kniewel, Krummacher, and Steinmayer; and, in our own country, by Bishops C. Wordsworth, Ellicott, and Westcott, by Dean Alford and Dr. Swete. Such an array of names may well give us pause in questioning any interpretation of a passage of Holy Scripture.

Let us first state this view in the language of its advocates. Westcott says: "The Ascension" is "presented as the beginning and condition of a new union. . . . Quod vides hoc solum me esse putas (Aug. in Joh. xxvi. 3). She thought that she could now enjoy His restored presence as she then apprehended it. She assumed that the return to the old life exhausted the extent of her Master's victory over death. Therefore . . . Christ said: 'Do not cling to Me, as if in that which falls under the senses you can know Me as I am; for there is yet something beyond the outward restoration to earth which must be realized before that fellowship towards which you reach can be established as abiding. *I am not yet ascended to the Father.* When that last triumph is accomplished, then you will be enabled

to enjoy the communion which is as yet impossible. . . . Meanwhile this is the reward of thy love, that thou shalt bear the message of the coming and more glorious change to those to whom thou didst bear the tidings of what seemed to be thy loss and theirs.' ”

Luthardt again quoted Grotius : “*Vis omnino frui amicitia meâ. . . . At ubi ad patrem ascendero, veniet tempus, quum frui meâ amicitia perfectissime poteris non terrestri contactu sed . . . spirituali.*” In other words : “This is merely an intermediate time, during which they must content themselves with His spiritual society.” Godet says : “His appearances as the Risen One were not . . . intended to establish the new state of communion between them and Him, but to prepare for it, to render it possible by laying the foundation of faith in the hearts of His own. This thought explains the words, ‘Touch me not.’” Krummacher : “She must no longer reckon upon any such intercourse with Him as had hitherto been accorded ; she must now exchange the life and touch of sight for the higher and more spiritual relation of faith, that which no longer knows Christ after the flesh.” Stier : “Thou shalt possess Me again, but not as before ; it shall be from this time and for ever *in the Spirit.*” Dr. Swete : “It was necessary to make it clear at once that old relations were not to be restored, as Mary evidently hoped ; that the Resurrection was the beginning of a new order. . . . The words that follow imply that the intimacy of the life in Galilee is to be exchanged for a new fellowship of a closer kind. . . . The Resurrection must, however, first be consummated by the Ascension : the visible presence must be finally withdrawn before the presence of Jesus in the Spirit can be realized.” Steinmayer : “He has come, but not to revive the former intercourse, but to close it.” Alford : “‘Do not thus—for I am not yet restored to you finally in the body—I have yet to ascend to the Father.’ ”

This mystical interpretation, supported by so many revered names, is based upon a great truth—the truth that Christ is better known to His people by the Spirit, through whom He is

ever and everywhere present with them, than He was, or could have been, in the days of His flesh. As an independent statement, it is without doubt deeply true. Its beauty and preciousness make it dear to us.

Yet we venture to say it is not the interpretation of these words of our Lord.

1. In the first place, as Luthardt points out, it is not permissible to change the meaning of *ἄπτεσθαι* to suit a preconceived interpretation. The word, as Westcott shows, means a "holding," in the desire to retain." He adds: "The exact form (*μη ἄπτου*) implies further that she was already clinging to Him when He spoke." If, then, our Lord is referring to a physical grasp of His feet or clothing, we cannot alter the meaning to a spiritual apprehension by faith; we cannot make our Lord say: "You may not hold me physically (*ἄπτεσθαι*) now, but after my Ascension you may hold me spiritually (*ἄπτεσθαι*)." .

2. Again, as said above, *πορεύου δέ*, in the second part of the sentence, is plainly contrasted with *μή μου ἄπτου*. Two alternatives are contemplated—(*a*) remaining with our Lord to hold and clasp His feet, and (*b*) going to His disciples with a definite message from Him as to His Resurrection and Ascension. It is a choice between the two, since both at once are plainly impossible; and He bids Mary choose the latter and forego the former.

3. Another consideration making strongly against the mystical view is the fact that, on several other occasions, our Lord not only did not discourage, but permitted and even enjoined, His disciples, male and female, to touch His Resurrection body. Thus (*a*) the women, who, at the command of the angel, had quitted the sepulchre to announce to the disciples our Lord's Resurrection, are said to have been met by Him and to have "held Him by the feet" (Matt. xxviii. 9); (*b*) on the occasion of His appearance to the ten disciples (Luke xxiv. 39, 40), our Lord bids them "handle" Him, in order to assure themselves that He has flesh and bones, as a spirit has not;

(c) He invites Thomas to touch His wounds (St. John xx. 27). These three passages entirely disprove the statement that His people were not to associate with Him on the old terms, or that they must now "exchange the life and touch of sight for the higher and more spiritual relation of faith." On the contrary, their faith is to be supported and strengthened by the sight and touch of Him, in order that they may be the better able to bear witness of Him to others (compare 1 St. John i. 1-3).

III. The view which appears to avoid all the foregoing difficulties, to agree with the language of the passage and with every part of it, and to provide the only adequate, harmonious, and consistent interpretation of this utterance of our Lord, is that which Tholuck, Godet, etc., attribute to Beza, Bengel, Hofmann, Piscator, Gerhard, Maldonatus, Heumann, and Mosheim, and the clearest statement of which seems to be that of Ebrard: "Thou needest not to hold Me so firmly, because My appearance is not a momentary one; I shall yet remain awhile upon the earth." "Do not delay with Me; thou wilt have time enough for intercourse with Me, for I will remain several weeks with you." "Go rather to My brethren and tell them that I am ascending." In this view *μή μου ἄπτου* is not taken *ἀπλῶς*, as an absolute prohibition, as though He were not to be held by her under any circumstances, now that He is risen from the dead; but only relatively, as a prohibition for the present moment, because He has other work for her to do. "Do not cling to Me, but go," is like, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice." Under the circumstances, Mary is to go to the disciples rather than stay with Him. She may enjoy intercourse with Him later, when that is done, since He will remain on earth some time yet previous to His Ascension. The *γὰρ* has a full and adequate force attributed to it, as it gives a good reason why she should relinquish for the moment her present happiness—namely, that she shall soon resume it again; while the *πορεύου* gives the present duty to be performed in lieu of following the impulse to remain with Him.

Stier objects to Ebrard's view: "But if this is made the sole

sense of the 'for,' then all that deeper meaning which we found in the 'Touch me not' is confused and weakened away." Let us say at once that this deeper meaning, however true it may be in itself, is better left out of the passage altogether. It does not properly belong to it by any requirements of grammar or logic ; it causes the words of Christ here to be in conflict with those spoken by Him to disciples on three other occasions, when He invited them to touch Him, thus making Him contradict Himself ; and it makes Him needlessly change the meaning of His own word *ἅπτεσθαι*. It is not the spiritual truth contained in Stier's exposition that we deny ; it is only its relevancy to the present passage.

We may therefore paraphrase our Lord's words thus : "Cling not to Me at present any longer. You see I am still here, I have not yet ascended to the Father, when My bodily presence will have passed from you for ever ; there will be time for further meetings before I do so. At the present moment there is other work to be done. My poor brethren are plunged in sorrow and wellnigh in despair. Go to them and tell them that I am alive and about to ascend. Go to Peter, who denied Me, but who loves Me still. Go to John, who even now came here to seek My dead body and has gone away with his doubts unsolved. Go to them all. They need the message you will bring them, for their hearts are sore. Tell them that I am ascending to Him who is not My Father and My God only, but also their Father and their God ; and it will make them glad. It is for this reason, Mary, rather than that you should linger with Me here in adoration, that I have appeared to you."

