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THE NEW TESTAMENT RECORD—II

OUR survey of the New Testament record, in the previous lecture, has enabled us to affirm that this provides ample evidence of belief in an Ascension of Christ. This conclusion forms the essential basis for a further examination of the Apostolic writings in order to determine (1) the occasion of the Ascension; (2) its attendant circumstances, and (3) its meaning as understood by the first generation of Christians.

1. *The Occasion of the Ascension*

For many centuries it has been the custom of the Church to celebrate the Ascension on the fortieth day after Easter. The authority for so doing is provided by the Acts of the Apostles where it is stated that Christ appeared unto the disciples "by the space of forty days".¹ In partial agreement with this would seem to be the further statement, in the same book, to the effect that Christ "was seen for many days of them that came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem".² Biblical critics at the present day, however, have not been slow to point out that this evidence as to the occasion of the Ascension is in apparent conflict with what St. Luke had already written in the final chapter of his first book, where the Ascension would seem to be represented as taking place on the evening of the day of the Resurrection. Against such a reading of the Lucan narrative it has been argued (1) that this would allow insufficient time for all the recorded events to take place, and (2) that it is unthinkable that the Ascension happened late at night.³ Neither of these contentions can be said to carry conviction.

¹ 1: 3. The thesis of B. W. Bacon ("The Ascension in Luke and Acts", *Expositor*, VII, 1909, pp. 254-61), that Acts 1 implies not an Ascension after forty days but an Ascension on Easter Day followed by forty days of appearances, is not convincing.

² 13: 31.

³ Larrañaga, *op. cit.*, pp. 457-61.

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The two disciples arrived at Emmaus “towards evening (*πρὸς ἑσπέραν*)” when “the day is now far spent”,¹ i.e. shortly before 6 p.m. when one Jewish day ended and the next began. The couple immediately returned to Jerusalem (three score furlongs) and we are left with a meal, a discourse, and a walk to the Mount of Olives, which involves no more than the Last Supper with its accompanying discourse and the walk to Gethsemane—the one could as easily culminate in the Ascension as the other had done in the arrest. As for the statement that the Ascension could not possibly have been at night, this completely lacks critical support, and such tenuous indications as there are might indeed be taken to suggest the exact opposite. The Lucan handling of the Transfiguration story provides a possible hint. We have already had occasion to remark that St. Luke altered the Marcan account in several particulars in order to represent the Transfiguration as the prefiguration of the Ascension. Besides those details previously listed, he made two additions which indicate the time of day of the occurrence. Thus he inserted: “Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep”²—this suggests a late hour—and also, unlike St. Matthew and St. Mark, he affirms that the party did not descend the mountain until the following day.³ So according to St. Luke the Transfiguration took place at night. It may be that his reason for emphasizing this was to provide another pointer to the Ascension which took place at night. This is anything but proof, but at least it has some basis in the text, even if fanciful, whereas the contention it is designed to refute has none.

There can indeed be no gainsaying that the final chapter of Luke does read like a continuous narrative, and this would seem to be guaranteed by the introduction of its final section with a phrase, *εἶπεν δὲ*,⁴ so characteristic of St. Luke that it is found fifty-nine times in the Gospels, fifteen in Acts and only once elsewhere in the New Testament. This phrase nearly always indicates the continuation of a narrative and never necessarily the contrary.⁵ Just as *εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς* at Luke 24: 17 implies no break in the narrative, so the identical words at 24: 44 may be understood in the same way.

¹ 24: 29.

² 9: 32.

³ 9: 37.

⁴ 24: 44.

⁵ K. Lake, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, 1907, p. 108.

Nevertheless, it must be frankly admitted that St. Luke was not a writer who was much concerned to indicate precise intervals of time¹ or to give details of exact location,² but there is one item of evidence that would endorse our understanding of Luke 24 as affirming that the Ascension occurred on Easter Day, and that is the Longer Ending of Mark. As we have seen, this addition is mainly a summary of the final chapter of Luke. At Mark 16: 14 Christ appears to the disciples and bids them go forth and preach the Gospel: the passage continues: "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken unto them, was received up into heaven."³ The undoubted continuity of this passage substantiates the conclusion that the Lucan narrative, upon which it is most probably based, equally implies no break in the action. What then are we to make of this apparent contradiction in the Lucan records?

It is not infrequently argued that in the interval that may be supposed to have elapsed between the writing of the Gospel and Acts, St. Luke came across further evidence which he deemed to be more reliable and therefore he included it in his second volume, thereby correcting, by implication, what he had written in his first. But the close relationship between chapter 9 of the Gospel and chapter 1 of Acts would seem to render this a doubtful supposition, and, moreover, it is just as reasonable to suppose either that St. Luke was familiar with two distinct traditions and, following the method so common in the Old Testament, recorded the two as of equal value, without presuming to adjudicate between them, or that he inserted the forty days on his own initiative for reasons yet to be discovered. In order to decide between these alternatives, it will be necessary first to consider what evidence there is for the existence of two separate traditions.⁴

In 1 Cor. 15: 5-8 St. Paul lists the witnesses of the Resurrection, of whom the last is himself. Now whether we say that

¹ F. H. Chase, *The Meaning of the Creed*, ed. G. K. A. Bell, 1918, p. 122.

² cp. 17: 11.

³ Mark 16: 19.

⁴ The varying Gnostic traditions need not concern us—18 months according to the Valentiniens (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 1. 3. 2.), to the Ophites (1. 30. 14), and to the Ethiopic *Ascension of Isaiah* (9.16. 545 days=18 months); 12 years according to *Pistis Sophia* (1.1). A. Harnack (*S.B.A.*, 1912, pp. 677f.) suggested that the 18 months might represent a correct tradition as to the date of St. Paul's conversion and the appearance on the Damascus road was the last of the risen Lord.

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the Ascension took place on Easter Day or forty days later, it is quite clear that the appearance to St. Paul was after the Ascension; yet he sees no distinction between his experience and those of Peter and the twelve. The implication therefore is that for St. Paul all the appearances were not only post-Resurrection but also post-Ascension.

It is probable that St. Matthew shared this same conception. As we have seen, the charge which Christ is represented as delivering in the concluding verses of this Gospel implies that the Ascension has already taken place. But if this final appearance is compared with the first appearance to the women, it is noticeable that the circumstances of the two events are not presented as being in any way strikingly different; on the contrary, on both occasions *προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ*.¹ It would not be unreasonable to see in this evidence that St. Matthew, like St. Paul, considered all the appearances to have taken place after the Ascension.

According to John, the gift of the Spirit was consequent upon the Ascension: "the Spirit was not yet given; because Jesus was not yet glorified."² Jesus was about to leave the world and "go unto the Father";³ He would then send to them the Comforter from the Father.⁴ On Easter Day, Jesus' first action, after saluting the disciples, is to breathe on them saying: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost."⁵ The implication is clear that the Ascension has taken place.⁶ That this is indeed so is confirmed by Jesus' statement to Mary at the tomb: "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."⁷ When He appears to the disciples He shows them His hands and later bids Thomas handle

¹ 28: 9||28: 17.

² John 7: 39.

³ 16: 28. This "going to the Father" is represented as a single act comprising three distinct events, viz. death, Resurrection and Ascension.

⁴ 15: 26; cp. 16: 7.

⁵ 20: 22.

⁶ This is a commonplace of contemporary New Testament scholarship. One of its clearest expositions is by Archimandrite Cassien, *La Pentecôte Johannique*, 1939, pp. 9-91.

⁷ 20: 17; cp. the comment of Marius Victorinus (*c. Arianos*, 3, 15), who states that Christ, before He could allow Himself to be touched, had to go to the Father with the human life which He had recovered from Hades (as distinct from His divine life as Logos) in order to have it sanctified.

Him;¹ again the implication is that the Ascension is an accomplished fact. We conclude therefore that, for St. John, the occasion of the Ascension was Easter Day.

Evidence for the persistence of this tradition is to be found in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. A.D. 130): "We also celebrate with gladness the eighth day in which Jesus also rose from the dead, and was made manifest, and ascended into heaven."² Again, according to the *Apology of Aristides* (c. 140): "after three days he rose again and went up into the heavens."³ According to the *Epistle of the Apostles* (c. 150): "He said unto us again: Behold, on the third day and at the third hour shall he come which hath sent me, that I may depart with him. And as he so spake, there was thunder and lightning and an earthquake and the heavens parted asunder, and there appeared a light cloud which bore him up."⁴ According to the *Gospel of Peter* (c. 150), when the women come to the tomb on Easter Day, an angel informs them: "He is risen and is departed thither whence he was sent."⁵ In the Pseudo-Tertullian treatise *Against the Jews*⁶ there is the statement: "Why, accordingly, after His Resurrection from the dead, which was effected on the third day, did the heavens receive him back? It was in accordance with the prophecy of Hosea uttered on this wise: 'Before daybreak they shall arise unto me, saying, Let us go and return unto the Lord our God, because he himself will draw us and free us. After two days, on the third day',⁷ which is His glorious Resurrection, He received Him back from earth into the heavens (whence the Spirit Himself had come to the Virgin) even Him whose Nativity and Passion alike the Jews had failed to recognize." Finally there is to be noted the interesting reading of the *Codex Bobiensis*, which at Mark 16: 2 inserts the words: "*subito autem ad horam tertiam tenebrae diei factae sunt per totum orbem terrae et descenderunt de caelis angeli et surgent in claritate vivi dei simul ascenderunt cum eo et continuo lux facta est.*"⁸

¹ John 20: 20, 27.

² 15: 8, 9.

³ 15.

⁴ M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 1926, p. 503.

⁵ 56 (James, *op. cit.*, p. 93). According to this same docetic work (19, p. 91), the divine power ascended at the death on the Cross.

⁶ 13. (*P.L.* 2. 636-37.)

⁷ cp. Hos. 6: 1, 2.

⁸ To these examples may be added (a) The Syriac Diatesseron (Aphraates, *Dem.*, 20. 11). (b) The Old Syriac Calendar which observes the Ascension on a Sunday (Lake, *op. cit.*, p. 114).