

## PREFACE

OF ALL THE articles in the Creed there is none that has been so neglected in the present century as that which affirms our Lord's Ascension into heaven. Only one book has been published in English on the subject—in 1910<sup>1</sup>—and of this three-quarters of the contents are more properly to be described as concerned with the Session. No history of the doctrine exists, as far as I have been able to discover, and only a limited number of articles, of very differing worth, has been devoted to it.

From the days of Justin Martyr's Trypho, the Ascension has had its detractors, and from Reimarus onwards it has been subjected to a long-sustained attack,<sup>2</sup> but the chief reason for this contemporary neglect lies without question in the scientific temper which became so predominant in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The Lucan account of the Ascension appeared to be so naïvely pre-Copernican that few could take it seriously. It must have brought a sense of great relief, therefore, to those who adopted this attitude when the great German scholar, A. Harnack, declared that, quite apart from its outmoded cosmology, the Lucan record was suspect, since the Ascension was wanting to the first three Gospels and was not mentioned in the First Epistle to the Corinthians nor by any of the Apostolic Fathers. He went on to assert that it had no separate place in the primitive tradition, being undifferentiated from the Resurrection, and that to give it any prominence at all was to be guilty of a deviation from the original Gospel.

The pamphlet in which Harnack formulated these views, *Das apostolische Glaubensbekenntniss* (1892), was so popular that within a year of its being issued it had run through twenty-five editions. In 1893 a translation was made by Mrs. Humphry Ward and published in the *Nineteenth Century* (XXXIV, pp. 158-76), and from then onwards Harnack's opinions made a profound impression upon English scholarship. Even to-day his

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Swete, *The Ascended Christ*, 1910. In 1901 there was issued a third reprint of the second edition of W. Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord*, first published in 1891.

<sup>2</sup> The literature is surveyed by V. Larrañaga, *L'Ascension de Notre-Seigneur dans le Nouveau Testament*, 1938, pp. 18-124.

interpretation of the New Testament evidence regarding the Ascension is frequently reproduced, without any fresh examination of the Biblical material and without any recognition of the fact that New Testament studies are no longer in the position that they were sixty years ago.

It is my purpose in this present work to undertake such an examination, and then to continue the history of the doctrine through the period of the ante-Nicene Church, through the age of the Conciliar Creeds to the first homilists and on to their remote descendants of the Carolingian Renaissance and of the reforming monastic movements in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The limits that I have set to this survey are necessarily artificial and a word of explanation is perhaps required. Two factors have prevented me carrying the subject further. First, the period corresponds to that covered by the volumes in Migne's two *Patrologiae*. Although new critical editions are constantly appearing, Migne will undoubtedly remain the standard work of general reference for many years to come, and since it provides a convenient, if not complete, corpus for ready consultation I have refrained from going beyond its chronological limits. In the second place, a rapid excursion through the later literature has led me to believe that neither the mediaeval divines nor the Reformation teachers—with the notable exception of Calvin—had much of significance to add to what had already been written on the subject by their predecessors in the faith. If my impression be correct, then there is little advantage to be gained by pursuing the history of the doctrine much beyond these limits, which, in any case, my own interests have predisposed me to observe.

We begin then with the Old Testament prefigurement and follow the doctrine through to the dawn of the scholastic era. On the basis of this historical review, I propose, in the final lecture, to call attention to those features which would appear to be of permanent value and which require re-emphasis if the Ascension is to be rescued from the oblivion to which so much neglect has temporarily consigned it.

J. G. D.

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