

The Logical Character of Resurrection-belief

‘Many men today are encouraged to regard religion as a cheat because they suspect their preceptors of failing to face the results of scientific discovery and biblical criticism . . . and even of not telling the whole truth as they see it.’ So says H. J. Paton in his Gifford Lectures, *The Modern Predicament*. No doubt something of what Paton has in mind might be developed by saying that there seems often a discrepancy, a gap, between preaching and teaching, between sermons and theology: a gap of which theological students, young curates and directors of post-ordination training are (amongst others) painfully aware. The gap yawns wide at all the historical commemorations of the Church’s year; it is perhaps most threatening of all at Easter. The apostles (we are told) ‘with great power gave their witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus’.¹ By contrast, Paton would say, contemporary witness is superficial if not disingenuous.

Did the resurrection occur? The burden of Easter sermons is that it did; and all Christians to be Christians must believe that it did.

But there is then the other side which leads to Paton’s dissatisfaction, and which creates, he would say, part of the ‘modern predicament’ . . .

What of biblical criticism—not to say scientific discovery? Do we as Christians believe that Jesus walked through closed doors?² Do we believe that he appeared after death with ‘flesh and bones’ and ate fish?³ Of course, there may be and are variant readings, and verses of doubtful authenticity by which to meet this point or that . . . but, what is then left of the resurrection? Is it enough to say with one commentator after another: ‘The difficulty of harmonizing the different accounts of the resurrection is great’, yet ‘dishonesty would have made the evidence more harmonious’ so that the discrepancies ‘show rather the comparative independence

¹ Acts 4.33.

² Cp. John 20.19.

³ Luke 24.39, 43.

of the writers' and all the more 'confirm their united testimony to the main fact on which they all agree'—the empty tomb. At any rate a critical attitude towards the New Testament has meant that the 'resurrection' has been taken to describe an ever-narrowing class of events, leaving for some only the empty tomb. But then comes the question: How long will it be before even this remnant is discredited? Meanwhile, if the Scripture holds all these difficulties, is our religion already a cheat? Can we preach the resurrection against such a background of theological reservations and difficulties? Can we legitimately profess belief in the resurrection while having reservations about the closed doors and the fish? Must our witness of the resurrection be intellectually compromised? Must our sermons be isolated from our theology?

We shall meet questions such as these only by answering first the question: What is Christian belief in the resurrection? and it is with that question that this article will for the most part be concerned. So many of our present difficulties arise because belief that the resurrection occurred is often taken to be logically isomorphic with belief that certain facts like 'eating fish' occurred. But is that logical assimilation justified?

Two hundred years ago the answer to this question would have been easy: 'Yes'; but let us realize from the outset that it is this easy answer which leads straight to the difficulties we have been enumerating. The resurrection was, we read, 'a thing to be judg'd of by men's senses', it was a 'Matter of Fact and an object of sense'.⁴ The worst that disbelievers like Thomas Woolston could do was to argue that the resurrection was an *imposture*; to counter such assertions it was enough that believers like Thomas Sherlock should describe a mock *Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* so as to establish that the apostles were 'not guilty' of giving false evidence. The resurrection was something which could be evidenced—that was common ground: the apostles were witnesses to a 'Matter of Fact and an object of sense'. The view has survived, of course, to our own day. Some ten years ago I chanced to have rooms in a Victorian vicarage, over the wash-basin of which was the saying of a certain nineteenth-century bishop—I think none other than Westcott. The saying was to the effect that

⁴ Thomas Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* (1729) (*Religious Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, J. M. Creed and J. S. Boys Smith, 1934, pp. 72, 73).

he was '*more certain of the Resurrection than of any other fact*'. As I stood shivering at that wash-basin with cold water coming out of the hot tap, ice on the windows, razor cuts on my face, I wondered: here were stark realities—facts if any were—blood, cold water, ice . . . certain as anything could be . . . 'matters of fact and objects of sense'. . . . But has the resurrection *that* kind of certainty?

What I propose to do in this article is, first, to show by reference to the resurrection narrative that belief in the resurrection is *something more* than belief in a matter of fact; thereafter to mention one or two implications of this view; and last of all to return to Paton's criticism. Let us begin then by turning to the resurrection narratives to see there what belief in the resurrection involves, and let us look first at the Emmaus story.

Here were the two disciples puzzled, sad, disappointed—and they 'communed and questioned together'. As they shared this fellowship of questioning, this discussion, this exchange of points, this engagement, 'Jesus himself'—the risen Lord—'drew near and went with them'. They saw the risen Jesus, as we might see any other companion on a walk, but, we read, 'their eyes were holden that they should not know him'. We need not read into that verse any divine teleology; at the same time let us notice that it was not their reasoning, rather was it their eyes, their vision, that was restrained, restricted, held in check, held back, so that in fact they did not know him. Their lack was not a correct interpretation or adequate categorical scheme, but rather a full discernment, a deeper vision—the penny hadn't dropped, the ice hadn't broken. However, within their fellowship of questioning, further points are developed, and by Jesus himself: 'Behoved it not the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into his glory? And beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures, the things concerning himself.' We are told afterwards that at this point their hearts 'burned within them', but I suggest that we take the word *καίω* as rather implying that at this point their hearts had just been *ignited, lit*, as a torch. . . . And it was a torch that only flared, only gave full illumination . . . when? The full disclosure was made, they *knew* the risen Christ in the fellowship of a village supper-table; in the intimacy of a home. Stranger . . . Teach . . . Interpreter . . . Friend . . . and then . . . the Risen Christ. . . . But at this point, the point

of full disclosure, '*he became invisible*'. To know the risen Christ was an empirical fact—something which was incontrovertibly the case, but *not* as an 'object of sense'. . . . Here was a situation epistemologically odd, as odd indeed as the word *ἀφαντος*. In the Bible it occurs only once besides here, and then of angels becoming invisible: and in Classical Greek I understand the word has only a poetical use—which for us means that the word has an ancestry which is nothing if not logically odd. In short, the risen Christ became 'invisible', but he was still there and known—but 'there' oddly, and 'known' oddly—odd from the point of view of 'objects of sense'. It was not like coming to know that this stranger in plus fours dining at the club is in fact Archbishop Makarios in disguise, cause for gratification and smoking-room excitement. Rather was there here a recognition distinctly odd. It was one which restored to the disciples vitality and commitment they had lost; they were not merely gratified: they were empowered. They 'rose up that very hour' and went to Jerusalem as *witnesses of the resurrection*, a fact they knew now in its fullness, and they knew it in this fullness, notice, when he 'vanished out of their sight', though not out of their loyalty. . . . There had been a fellowship of questioning, an exchange of points illuminated by Bible study, but all these were preliminaries to something else, to that full disclosure which came in a situation more than 'objects of sense', and which came in such a way that we speak of it as a disclosure given by the initiative of God. Not only had the Scriptures been 'opened', but their eyes had been 'opened', and if the word be taken in its wider context, both had been 'opened', as a womb, to be creative of new life, new duties, a richer existence.

But, you might say, does this not come dangerously near to making resurrection belief entirely independent of 'objects of sense'—and if we had nothing but the Emmaus story that challenge might be serious. So we pass now to what, on the face of it, is the other extreme—St Thomas. We *need* Thomas. Here is the plain, down-to-earth empiricist. 'Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails [tactual as well as visual verification is needed] I will not believe.' There is then the invitation—'see my hands', 'reach hither thy finger'. . . and Thomas who has *seen, believes*. Is his resurrection-belief, then, belief in a matter of fact, objects of sight and touch? If St Thomas had said, 'I admit it's Jesus after all', or 'I'm assured;

I'm prepared to witness in a court of law, at a "Tryal of Witnesses", that it is the same body', that might have been our conclusion. But when St Thomas is assured, his language goes beyond perceptual or legal language. He confesses: 'My Lord and my God'. Here is a commitment which goes beyond what is seen; a witnessing which is more than trials and law courts take account of. Thomas sees . . . but not only perceptual objects. He believes in the resurrection as an 'object of sense' and more.

But you may puzzle—an 'object of sense' and more? How can that be? We might anticipate the answer by recalling that resurrection assurance came in the friendly intimacy of a homely meal . . . but for the fullest answer let us go to our third and last example: Mary Magdalene. For Mary, Jesus was not some great teacher or national figure—he was someone who had changed her life. She wasn't perplexed by the political or theological implications of it all like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, nor did she formulate empirical doubts like St Thomas—what mattered was that she had lost a friend, and all she could do was to go to where there was still a reminder of him—the tomb where his body lay. How powerful a symbol of friendship the human body can be! Then, not even satisfaction at the tomb . . . no body . . . no relevant 'matter of fact', nor 'object of sense'. Then, as much as the two disciples or Thomas, she starts asking questions, seeking explanations. 'They', perhaps the Jews, perhaps the gardener, must have taken away the Lord's body . . . and it is in this mood of explanation-seeking that she says to someone she takes to be the gardener: 'Tell me where you've put him; I'll take the body and care for it.' Here is a situation, here is thinking, so much concerned with 'objects of sense', such as bodies, as to merit no more than the descriptive phrase 'the gardener'. . . . Do you remember how in the *Patris*, in his native country, when Jesus was rejected by those who a little while before had been astonished by his preaching and marvelled at his mighty works; do you remember how, with the rejection, came descriptive phrases 'the carpenter', 'the son of Mary', 'brother of James'? So, likewise, 'the gardener' . . . when there is no disclosure.

Then, the situation 'comes alive', takes on 'depth', loses its impersonal 'official' character . . . the risen Christ discloses himself and on an intimate greeting is appropriate currency: 'Mary'. . . . The resurrection cannot be netted in the language of definite

descriptions. The logical difference between 'Mary' and 'the gardener' tells how much *more* the resurrection *is* than an 'object of sense'. Here then is our special point arising from the story of Mary Magdalene: the resurrection is a situation which is a matter of fact *and more*, an 'object of sense' *and more*, precisely as the most intimate personal interchange is all that, too. Further, just as to human love we respond with a full devotion—so Mary's response is not 'Teacher'—how limited a portrayal that word gives—but rather 'My Master, Lord, chief, prince' . . . almost the same language as St Thomas . . . words which are currency for a *full* loyalty, to tell *now* of the same *full* commitment she had known before in Jesus. *Here is resurrection-belief, a total response to something which touches us personally.* Perhaps after all in gracing a wash-basin mirror in the Victorian vicarage the bishop's assertion was more significant than we realized. Freezing water, shaving soap, blood—these may be facts, i.e. 'objects of sense'—but of none of them was I so certain as (looking into the mirror) of another 'fact' an 'object of sense' and more, 'myself'—that 'I'm I', a conviction which in so far as it goes beyond perceptual 'matters of fact' affords something of a parallel with our assurance of the risen Christ. Further, in so far as the bishop's extreme language was trying to emphasize the *all-embracing* significance of resurrection-belief, the *total* commitment the resurrection evokes, we might say that his chief fault was to express a most important point in the most misleading language possible; which is what so often we Christians have done. The Christian witness cannot be expressed in logically straightforward language without doing itself injustice and digging its own grave; and we ought to say 'boo' to the geese of various kinds which could tempt us to try. But to come back. We must indeed distinguish in relation to the resurrection:

(a) First the 'matters of fact' which are 'objects of sense' and about which empirical questions can be asked; which legal witnesses talk of, on which historical discussion can be centred, for which verification can be sought.

(b) Then, the situation which is such 'matters of fact' *and more*—a situation which is empirically odd, and one to which we have a clue in some personal situations. To know what 'resurrection' means, demands such a fuller discernment. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ; if Christ is for us exhausted in perceptual

terms; if the risen Christ is no more than a matter of fact which is an 'object of sense', then we are of all men most pitiable.

(c) Finally, such a fuller discernment which embraces 'objects of sense' and more, evokes and is fulfilled in a response, a commitment, in virtue of which we become, by our response, Christian witnesses of the resurrection'—'obedient to our heavenly vision'.

Just a few points now by way of illustration and conclusion: and the first to show how easy it has been for Christians, as well as their opponents, to mistake the logic of what they were saying, and they fail to do justice to the logical complexity of their contentions.

We have urged that the resurrection narratives do not so much record 'facts', tell of 'objects of sense'; as evoke situations, situations of discernment-response for which we have parallels in the devotion we give to those whose love we return. Now that discernment which is centred on Jesus is called by us Christians 'eternal life in Christ Jesus', and it is against such a background as this that we must understand such ostensibly simple phrases, e.g. as that Jesus Christ 'opened unto us the gate of everlasting life'.

But if all that is the case, then not only does 'resurrection' exceed all 'objects of sense', but 'immortality' and 'eternal life' are no logical kinsman, and (*pace* Dr C. D. Broad) Christ is no term in an argument for immortality from analogy, but rather a focus for resurrection-vision and devotion.

So we can see how logically skew and cross-purposed are such objections as are commonly raised: if Jesus opens the gate of everlasting life to Christians, do only Christians survive? Can Christians argue that we are immortal because Jesus is immortal, when what is so obvious is that Jesus is utterly different from us? How easy to get off on the wrong logical foot—and for Christians it can be as easy as for their opponents. Did not A. A. Sykes, in 1740, declare that the resurrection was an 'argument for immortality from eyesight', displaying the proposition that we are immortal in such large empirical letters that even the least philosophical could read and understand. Resurrection for Sykes, was a plain 'object of sense'; 'immortality' was a kinsman of 'eternal life'.

Eschewing such over-simplification as leads only to puzzles and

needless difficulties, we have stressed the logical peculiarity of the resurrection. Was there an empty tomb? Did Jesus eat fish? Did the resurrection occur? All these seem plain isomorphous questions, questions of the same form about 'matters of fact'. But recall $\frac{2}{3}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{0}{0}$. All *seem* to belong to the same logical family, but what of the last? An ugly duckling indeed. Similarly, we have pleaded the logical peculiarity of resurrection: that the situation on which the Christian faith is based is nothing if not odd: another ugly duckling! What 'resurrection' stands for includes but transcends 'empty tomb' and 'eating fish', as much as 'loving' includes but transcends 'meeting', as 'devotion' is more than 'efficient support', as 'I' tells of more than public behaviour exhausts.

What now of Paton's criticism? Are we cheating in our witness? Does there not still remain a gap, a logical gap between, on the one side, the phrases in terms of which the Christian faith is *preached*, and on the other side, that clear unambiguous language which stands for 'objects of sense'? Is there not a gap between the swans and the ducks? Certainly there is a gap; indeed, the whole concern of this article has been to expose the gap for what it is. But we would only be cheats if we could do nothing, or would do nothing, about bridging the gap. We should, for example, be cheating if once we had distinguished between the 'resurrection' with its peculiar logical status, and 'matters of fact' about which ordinary questions of evidence can be asked, we said that the 'matter of fact' assertions did not matter. At its most naïve this cheat would be a prejudice against theology such as was expressed in the old revivalist ditty: 'The Religion of Paul and Silas is good enough for me.' At its more sophisticated, it could show itself in a desire to take the Scriptural narratives so symbolically that it does not matter whether the stories are fiction, fable, or fancy.

But in emphasizing the distinctive character of the Christian belief in the resurrection, it has been no part of my purpose to deny its essential reference to 'objects of sense' as well. Indeed, on the contrary, I have tried to give a hint about how the two points can be combined, about how the logical gap can be bridged. The hint comes from recognizing what has likewise to be both distinguished and related in situations of human love and devotion. For here, too, there are 'objects of sense' and more. Characteristically personal behaviour is more than 'what's seen'; or, if it is not, religious people are cheats indeed. We shall be helped to meet

Paton's criticism if we concentrate on this personal model, and in particular if we develop the theme that while of course all personal loyalty is anchored in some facts of an empirical kind, personal devotion never builds on empirical fact with a nicely calculated less or more. In this way 'personal devotion' can be a logical paradigm by which to understand 'resurrection witness'.

SAMPLE