

MODERN CRITICISM AND THE RESURRECTION.¹

BY FRANK R. WHITZEL.

[Professor Bowen's theory of the resurrection of Christ has been neglected by our modern theologians, probably because it presupposes spiritualism and would accept the principles of the Psychical Research Societies as possible.—Ed.]

IT is but a truism to say that the Resurrection is the central feature of Christianity. It is the living pulsing heart of the religion without which Christianity is little more than a formal system of morality, cold and lifeless. From the very first the Resurrection was preached as a vital fact and with a great and gladsome ardor which could come only from unshadowed conviction. And more than all else combined, the power of this preachment it was which carried the faith to victory over every obstacle. To fathom the reasons for this sure conviction and to bring to light the historical facts which occasioned it have been the task and the despair of rational inquiry for nineteen centuries. Some small progress has been made of late toward unraveling the mystery, or at least toward disentangling the warp of essentials from the woof of fancy woven into the fabric; and it is the present object to set forth in non-technical phrase the results arrived at by the critics, whose works, not always easy of access, are usually difficult of understanding to those unskilled in ancient and modern languages.

Students of the New Testament commonly begin by reading the Gospels, and they find therein four short and fragmentary accounts of the Resurrection. Possibly the story was told in a different form some time prior to the composition of these narratives, discussion of this possibility will be deferred for the moment. Three of the versions are no doubt based upon the same tradition, but all of them betray a childlike naïveté which reveals clearly the simple faith of the writers. The different accounts are not at all congruous. If any one be accepted as historically true, each of the others must be regarded as necessarily false. Yet Christians since the age of the Apostolic Fathers have had no difficulty in accepting all the accounts

¹ For a thorough discussion of this subject in all its aspects, those interested are referred to *The Resurrection in the New Testament*, by Prof. Clayton R. Bowen of the Meadville (Pa.) Theological School, of whose views this study is in very large part an epitome. The book, price \$1.25, can be procured only from its author.

as equally veracious, the word mystery reconciling all contradictions. The authors of the narratives thought of Jesus as a man who had been dead and had come to life again, and after coming to life was exactly the same as before his death. Or not quite the same, either. They confused the properties of a living man with the properties they imagined a spirit might possess, and they endowed the newly awakened Jesus with both sets. He could talk and feel and eat the same as ever, walk along the road, expound the Scriptures, even work his customary miracles. But he could also make himself invisible, pass through closed doors or rise bodily in the air. His unhealed hands and feet, his spear-pierced side, though the wounds were sufficient to cause his death two days ago, now occasioned him no distress, and his clothing had mysteriously returned from the gambling soldiers. All this is charmingly ingenuous if viewed rightly. It illustrates the artless belief of the evangelists, and like the errors and inharmonies in other documents of the New Testament which witness irrefutably to their essential truth, it brings to us the strong conviction that *something happened*.

What could that something have been? That is the question which almost two millenniums of earnest study have not succeeded in answering satisfactorily. Men to-day cannot accept angels and reviving dead men or indeed miracles of whatever kind. They require evidence before accepting anything. Hence, critics seek to simplify the Resurrection problem by pruning away the miraculous features of the Gospel narratives, and then they inquire if the residuum can be historical truth. By comparing the various accounts thus truncated and by eliminating next the patent contradictions, they offer us as embodying the actual events which set the Resurrection legend on foot the following outline sketch. On Sunday morning following the crucifixion certain women visited the tomb of Jesus and discovered that it was vacant. They reported the fact to Peter and John who hastened to the sepulcher and found it indeed to be empty. Without further evidence, but recollecting the prophecies of their Master, the disciples believed that Jesus had come back to bodily life, and they immediately began that perfervid preachment of the Resurrection which volumed into a world religion.

That, it is claimed, is the residue of fact. Whatever else the disciples may have experienced was but subjective, having no existence save in their own highly excited minds. They may have believed that they held frequent communion with their Master, but such fancied experiences were of a piece with those of ecstasies

and mystics of all ages and all religions. An empty tomb was the source of the Resurrection legend, and all we need inquire is how that tomb came to be empty. Many theories have been advanced in vain to account for this empty tomb, and the present writer pleads guilty to the charge of ascribing the abstraction of the body it had sepulchered to Joseph of Arimathæa, that mysterious personage who appears only to bury Jesus and as quickly to disappear.

But, let us inquire if the story thus outlined is adequate to explain the facts. Men of that period may have been credulous and uncritical, but they were not fools. They possessed common sense even as people of to-day, and the Gospels themselves bear witness to the surprise excited by the announcement of the Resurrection and to the great reluctance of the disciples to believe it. Let us ask, What would be our attitude to-day under similar circumstances? Suppose we chanced to find deserted and empty a tomb in which we knew some one had recently been buried. Would we jump to the conclusion that its late occupant had come to life? How absurd! No assertions of strangers, no protestations of friends, in fact no power on top of earth could make us believe otherwise than that some person or persons had taken the body away. How illogical, then, to imagine that these hardheaded fishermen and peasants, unskilled in metaphysical subtleties but fully competent to judge of matter-of-fact concerns, would at once reach so extraordinary and at the same time, by hypothesis, so fallacious a conclusion!

No, the empty tomb alone would not be adequate. But suppose the man buried there had predicted his rising, and then, after his death and burial, was actually seen clothed in his ordinary body, would this be sufficient to create a belief untroubled by faintest qualm that that man had come back to life after being genuinely dead? At first thought one is tempted to concede a hesitating yes, but further consideration evokes a doubt which grows quickly into a sturdy negative. To begin with the prophecies. Careful study has brought to light the probability that Jesus, in saying he would rise on the third day, had reference only to the long standing belief, derived by the Jews from the Persians, that the soul of any one deceased hovered near the corpse three days to make sure of death before taking its flight to its permanent abode. Stating the case in the mildest form, it is at least very doubtful if Jesus ever foretold his resurrection in the sense that he would be seen prior to his second advent by any man, disciple or not disciple, in any body, spiritual or carnal. Very many critics now believe his prediction

meant merely, "They will kill me, but I shall not die. After three days my spirit will rise to Heaven."

But whether or not this interpretation be correct, it is at all events certain that the disciples had no expectancy of any sort of resurrection. Especially is this fact evident after the crucifixion when they fled in dismay from Jerusalem. They had at that time exactly the same anticipatory state of mind regarding a future appearance of Jesus that any person would have now-a-days in respect to seeing a beloved companion who had crossed the boundary. What then would we ourselves believe were we to meet in the flesh a man whom we knew to have been pronounced dead and to have been buried? After our first incredulity were overcome and we were convinced of its being actually the same person, would we then say, "This man was dead and has come back to life?" Never. Not by any possibility. We would inevitably say, "Why, the man did not die after all." Explanations, protestations, even any conceivable proofs would be of not the slightest avail. No sort of argument would be able to vanquish our instantly formed judgment that this was a case of suspended animation and that the man had not really been dead. Or, if proof of death were irresistible, back we would swing to denial of identity. We could by no manner of means be persuaded of return from real death to real life; indeed, before accepting the allegation we would go so far as flatly to deny our own sanity of mind.

It is fair to assume that the effect of such an occurrence upon the Galilean fishermen would have been precisely the same as upon ourselves in so far as concerns believing in the veritable death of the person before them. True, they had not our knowledge of continuity or of the rule of law in nature, hence were prone to look upon miracles as a normal mode of action of the supernal powers. But it would still seem to be beyond the bounds of possibility that they would immediately and unanimously have believed as fact the revival of a man really dead, and have proceeded to preach that belief with such a certainty of conviction as not merely to persuade their immediate associates but also to determine the creed of the entire European world for some sixty generations.

Thus it is clear that neither the empty tomb nor the revived body of Jesus is at all adequate to explain the Resurrection. From such premises the story in its present form could not have arisen. Realization of this insufficiency has led students of the subject to go behind the Gospel narratives in quest of some more stable basis for the legend. When we consider the early date of the story itself

and its consequences to the world, the radiant certainty of those companions of Jesus who proclaimed it, their triumphant appeal to eye witnesses of events as occurring in the broad light of day, and the readiness with which evangelists of the teaching sealed their conviction with their blood, we are compelled to grant that that teaching, true or false, must have had an origin commensurate in some degree with its momentous import.

After all, say the critics, the Gospels are not our earliest witnesses of the Resurrection. They were written by the second generation, not the first, and took form from forty to seventy years after the events they narrate. But in the letters of Paul of Tarsus we have the thoughts of a contemporary of Jesus and an associate of his disciples. Paul wrote with absolutely no knowledge of the Gospels since they were not then in existence, though it is now difficult to read his letters without unconsciously carrying over into them ideas absorbed from previous reading of those Gospels. But let this be avoided. Let Paul be read as if for the first time. Laying aside utterly all conceptions of the Resurrection gained from later documents, let it be remembered only that here is the very first mention of the event, to be taken just as it stands without any supplementary coloring from other sources. What does Paul say? 1 Cor. xv: "Christ died...was buried...rose again the third day...was seen of Cephas, then of the Twelve...of above five hundred...of James, of all the apostles...of me also." (The Greek verb is better translated "appeared to" than "was seen of," in fact is so translated elsewhere, Luke xxiv. 34, and as used implies a vision rather than merely normal sight.) Jesus was "raised from the dead"; not, as our English necessarily puts it, from the abstractly dead, but from among the souls of those who have died, from out the whole collective body of departed spirits. The word employed is plural and means not simply "the dead," but "the dead people." Repeated in many forms, this is past all peradventure the meaning Paul gives to the Resurrection. Although he lived closer in time and contact to the events he mentions than any other man whose writings have come down to us, Paul tells us almost none of the incidents we are accustomed to connect with the passion and rising of Jesus. He has not a word of an empty tomb, of an announcing angel, of a corpse that revived and ate with friends or discussed the new evangel. And as Paul believed and taught so did Peter and James and all the rest of the apostles. Said Paul, speaking of the Twelve, "I labored more abundantly than they all...Therefore, whether it were I or they, so we preached and so ye believed."

Hence, whatever was Paul's understanding of the Resurrection was that also of the other apostles. Let us then examine more closely the conceptions underlying his theological message.

No one can properly comprehend the Resurrection story until he has made himself familiar with the metaphysical beliefs held either consciously or unconsciously by the people of that far-off age. To us of to-day resurrection and a future life, that is, a continuance of personality after bodily death, are approximately the same thing. Should it be proven to us that some deceased friend is still existing in another sphere of being, we would at once assume that he was essentially the same person in his mentality, inclinations, loves, longings, even imperfections that he was when he lived among us. We would look upon him simply as himself, perhaps somewhat modified by his enlarged opportunities for apprehending the truth, but still himself in all distinctive qualities. Not so the ancient Greeks. They did not as a rule question the fact of continued existence after death. But they looked upon this existence as a shadowy, unsubstantial condition, if not positively miserable at least barely endurable even for those who had led the best of lives. "I'd rather live on earth a peasant's hireling than king it o'er the dead," mourned the shade of Achilles.

But, it may be objected, Christianity arose among the Jews, and surely they believed in no such cheerless immortality. Indeed they did. Passing over the Sadducees who, in revolt of soul at such a dreary fate, chose rather to deny all possibility of a future life, the Pharisees and the Jews generally held to just this conception. The dead survived, yes, but in a far-away Sheol, neither damned nor blessed, merely vegetating, almost forgotten of Jehovah who took a personal interest in the living rather than in the dead. It is possible to find passages in the Old Testament ascribing to departed souls a more vivid existence, and indeed the details of the picture were hazy, confused and inconsistent; but without doubt this was the common belief of the day.

Came now Jesus, and after him with far more proselyting zeal Paul, preaching a Resurrection from the dead, meaning a translation of the souls immured in this hopeless, cheerless, ineffectual Sheol to the glorious Kingdom of Heaven, there to be endowed with a spiritual body capable of function; that is, of accomplishing physical feats like those of living persons and of enjoying in that exalted realm a superabundant life. Nay more, those still living on earth might by accepting Christ escape Sheol altogether, obtain the new spiritual body and go directly to that happy Kingdom where

God reigned in righteousness. They could do so because the Messiah in power and glory was surely coming soon, before the end of the generation, when all these things would be accomplished. Men could thus themselves be directly saved, and vicariously, by baptism for the dead, could win the Kingdom for their beloved gone before. Is it any wonder that such a teaching swept all before it in that unscientific and uncritical age?

Such in briefest outline was the transcendental scheme which Paul denominated salvation. We are not so much concerned with the theology itself as with the facts that lay behind it, or rather with the events which Paul believed had taken place and which were for him proofs of the reality of salvation as he conceived it. Said Paul to his hearers:

"We shall at the parousia, the second coming, be translated directly to Christ's kingdom and exchange our present bodies for spiritual bodies, while all Christians who die before the parousia, though they go for a time to that abode where all souls have hitherto dwelt, will likewise obtain new and real bodies of spiritual substance and join the saved in Heaven."

"How do you know?"

"Because Jesus has already made the journey. He died and went to Sheol, just as do all souls; but the power of God withdrew him thence, resurrected him from among the spirits of the dead and crowned him as Messiah."

"What reason have you to say so?"

"Reason enough. He has been seen since his death, clothed in his spiritual body, and he thus has demonstrated his continued life."

"Perhaps you but imagined it."

"Impossible! He appeared first to Peter, then to the Twelve, then to five hundred men most of whom are still here to bear witness. And I myself have seen him. As Jesus is now, so may we all be."

This was a lofty conception; in that day over-lofty for all save the more intelligent and educated. The early apostles pressed home their teaching with passionate fervor, but most of their hearers were not intellectually capable of understanding their abstruse metaphysics, which indeed are not always easy to ourselves. The ordinary man turned naturally from the novel to the familiar, from the idea of a spiritual body to that of an earthly body. Not all at once. When the Corinthians, believing in the resurrection of Jesus, yet questioned the universal resurrection, Paul was able successfully

to combat them and so show that he meant not a corporeal but a spiritual anastasia. But the Corinthian error persisted. And when the appearances of Jesus had definitely ceased, when time and the oppressor had removed all original witnesses and cooled the early enthusiasm, and above all when the unaccountable delay in the coming of the parousia had weakened the authority of much of Paul's doctrine, the literal idea of the common man prevailed throughout the Hellenic world over the high conception of the great Apostle. Then it became current that the earthly body of Jesus came back to life, rose and walked out of its tomb. His appearances were transferred from Galilee, whither the affrighted and despairing disciples had fled, to Jerusalem from whence the church had begun its mission. Appearance was added to appearance, speeches and incidents were fabricated, even an ascension story was developed to dispose of the revived body, and all these tales were fragmentary, incoherent, mutually contradictory, simply because there was no basis in historical fact for any of them. The Gospel writers set down some of the stories as they heard them, not venturing to attempt any reconciliation. And thus the error of a too literal interpretation of the apostolic preaching became embodied in the written tradition, perpetuating the great misconception and leading all Christians to believe in the eventual resurrection of their present earthly bodies.

It is not possible to set down in a short paper the critical reasons for the conclusion here outlined or to examine the textual evidence which supports it. But it is proper to ask what if anything the critics have gained. Beneath the popular but incredible story of a body coming to life in a tomb near Jerusalem, they have found an earlier version which knew only of apparitions in Galilee of the spirit of the Master; and these apparitions they believe to be well authenticated by an eye witness, Paul, testifying also on behalf of many others who were there to confront him if he spoke falsely.

At once it can be said, waiving for the moment other considerations, that the Resurrection under this view is fully adequate to account for historical developments. Were a great teacher to return to us in spirit, his very appearance would attest to us the truth of his message, and doubts would never trouble us any more. We can thus appreciate the certainty of conviction on the part of the apostles, the vigor and earnestness of their evangelistic campaign, their confident challenge that the facts were well known and indisputable, their cheerful submission to every fate, even death in its most

hideous form, their unshakable faith in salvation through Jesus the Christ. Further, we can understand the extraordinary success of their missionary labors. We can see why the new teaching rapidly grew beyond the narrow Judaism from which at first it so little differed, why it appealed so irresistibly to the common men of antiquity, why it became the great and conquering religion of the Hellenistic world. All this, which the story of an empty tomb or a revived corpse is totally inadequate to account for, is at once explicable on the assumption that a spirit returned to earth to supply the initial momentum.

But are we any nearer to a rational explanation of the Resurrection? Can we better perceive the historical facts which gave rise to that story? Is the apparition of a spirit to the men of that dim and ancient age any easier to believe in as an actual fact than the story of a crucified corpse reviving and walking about and eating with former friends? All the difficulties are by no means removed, yet with some confidence an affirmative answer to these questions may be given.

Let me hasten to say that there is no intention of basing the argument on any mental form of religious experience. A rationalistic interpretation of the phenomenal world demands that inner conviction be unhesitatingly set aside. Not that subjective experience, religious or otherwise, has no validity. It is perfectly valid, but only for the individual who has the experience. It can have no general validity; that is, no proposition is in the least established by the fact that any number of persons have an intuitive perception of its truth. The solemn attestation of earnest men that the truth of their religion, Buddhism, Islamism, Christianity, is assured by inner revelation can have no weight before the tribunal of reason. Likewise, though here exception may possibly be taken, any alleged experience which is not and can not be repeated is fatally defective. Quoting from Myers's *Human Personality*, "Our ever growing recognition of the continuity, the uniformity, of cosmic law has gradually made of the alleged uniqueness of any incident its almost inevitable refutation." No dead man, aside from Jesus, has ever come to life. None do so now. Can we believe on the scanty and contradictory evidence offered us that the human body of Jesus came to life? We may say we believe it, but really our minds cannot conceive it since it lacks all contact with ascertained reality. At most we can think only of a more or less prolonged syncope, not true death, on the part of the resuscitated.

Do we mean to assert, then, that the appearance of a spirit is

any less impossible? Any more frequently to be observed? Any better known as a part of objective nature? Exactly that. The folklore of all peoples is filled with just such stories. Down the ages from the dawn of civilization and before have come accounts of spirits of departed men communicating more or less clearly with the living and appearing more or less vividly to mortal eyes. While these folk tales and ghost stories bring with them no proof, they at least afford a presumption that spirits may exist and under certain conditions may make themselves manifest. Possibly there is nothing in these tales. If that be the case we shall be left without any collateral evidence whatever of a spirit world. But truly it is in this body of phenomena alone, which claims to report actual relations with a spiritual realm and which ranges from the haziest of folk tales to well authenticated apparitions, that we may hope to find any scientific basis able to render a belief in the Resurrection rational.

The field is not unpromising. Many scholars have pointed out that human testimony to the activities of spiritual beings is as strong as to any other matters whatsoever. The point is that the testimony must be much stronger. The materials for study are abundant and ubiquitous. Behind them are forces claiming to be spirits, and the claim has not been refuted. If the phenomena are not caused by spirits, then let science do its duty and tell us what does cause them. They are as much a fact in nature as any other phenomena, as respectable. Recognizing the justice of such a plea, certain eminent men and women have organized societies to study with rigorous scientific methods all phenomena alleged to be supernormal. If the conclusion of these societies, after painstaking and comprehensive investigation, should be that no such event as the appearance of a spirit to living eyes is at all substantiated and that every such alleged occurrence dissolves into fraud or error, then we shall be left without a single support in reason for the story of the Resurrection of Jesus, let it be according to Paul or according to John.

But such has not been their report. In the various publications of the English and the American Societies for Psychical Research and also in the works written by independent investigators at home and abroad are to be found incidents as marvelous as the apparition of Jesus, authenticated by testimony sufficient to bring absolute conviction on any other subject. If proof is not yet generally claimed, it is only because the events are so different from the known activities of nature that cautious inquirers await before announcing final decision still more overwhelming evidence accom-

panied by a rational theory which will reduce the occurrences to that order which all men feel sure is uniform in the cosmos.

Herein, then, rest our hope and the duty of our scientific leaders. Conservative savants yet hold aloof, but even they are beginning to take notice. The evidence of something, of something which cries out for study, is becoming too copious and challenging for science much longer to pass it by; and upon the decision of science in this field rests the possibility, as Myers long ago pointed out, of our being able to accept the Resurrection and with it a re-born Christianity. If science declares that spirits have appeared to mortals, indeed that they are appearing even now, then we can put credence in Paul's solemn asseveration that Jesus appeared "to Peter, to the Twelve, to myself also." This is our best, nay more, our only hope; and by no means is it slender. Thousands in every land in these sad times of death have found consolation and hope renewed, not in the age-old story of a corpse that revived, but in what seems to them real evidence, observed this day at their own fireside, that their beloved dead do live again. Thus may bloom once more a purified and enduring faith in the Resurrection and the Life.

THE CYCLE OF LAW.

BY HOMER HOYT.

THE quest for legal justice leads to two principles, apparently as wide as the poles asunder. One principle states that unlimited freedom to decide each case upon its merits—according to equity and conscience—is indispensable to justice, while the other principle just as positively proclaims that unlimited freedom to decide cases according to equity and conscience leads to the abuses of the Star Chamber and the Third Degree. One principle decries the rule of precedent as the source of injustice, the other principle lauds it as the very fountain of justice. Thus do the oracles of justice seem to contradict each other and cause laymen to believe that the legal system blows hot and cold at the same breath.

The paradox set forth is no figment of the imagination but a real problem in the growth of law. The opposing principles of justice according to an iron standard and justice according to conscience mark the extreme points between which the law has fluctuated in the course of its development. *The Cycle of Law* embraces the period in which the law has started from a system in which one