

**Demythologizing Old and New, and
Luke's Description of the Ascension**
A Layman's Appraisal

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It is no secret that many theologians, teachers and preachers nowadays do not believe Luke's description of the ascension, nor Mark's either far that matter.

They do not believe that those things happened which Luke says happened, nor that the apostles saw what Luke says they saw. There is nothing new about this: for various reasons the majority of Luke's contemporaries, and hearing the apostles report of the ascension, rejected it forthwith, and so have the majority of mankind ever since. The only new thing is that in our own times large numbers of those who profess the Christian faith have joined the great majority, for reasons, they say, of cosmology, in not believing what Luke has written.

They still, be it said, profess faith in the ascension and its meaning (whatever that may be); it is Luke's description of it that they no longer believe. It follows nonetheless that when they talk of the ascension they are by, no means talking of the same thing as Luke, and it might seem strange at first that they should insist on retaining the same terms for what is now something very different.

But this behaviour too has ancient precedents, and should not surprise us. When Israel in the desert found themselves unable to continue believing in a Moses who had ascended the mountain, they continued nonetheless to use the name of Moses' God, Jehovah; only now the name denoted not the God who had literally descended from heaven to meet Moses upon Sinai, but the golden calf (Exod 32:1–6). None of them was so foolish or forgetful of history as to think that the golden calf which now stood before them was literally 'the god which had brought them up out of the land of Egypt'. They knew well enough that this golden calf itself had not even been in Egypt; they had just made it with their own hands. The calf was simply a better way of representing the forces of redemption to the modern mind, than the older theology which talked of God literally coming down upon Sinai. The literalisms were crude; the symbolism more sophisticated and acceptable.

Even the present wave of unbelief in Luke's account of the ascension is scarcely new; it goes back, as we all know, to R. Bultmann and his famous 1941 lecture (English translation: *New Testament and Mythology*, in *Kerygma and Myth*, Vol 1, ed. by H. W. Bartsch, tr. by R. H. Fuller, 2nd ed., S.P.C.K., London 1964, pp. 1–16), a lecture which by now has been exhaustively discussed from every conceivable point of view until its antisupernaturalist presuppositions have become unmistakably clear and widely advertised. Bultmann's theory has, of course, been much modified—some would even say laid to rest—by his successors; but its influence lives on. That it should do so in antisupernaturalist circles is only to be expected; what is remarkable, and calls for some explanation, is that Bultmannian axioms and presuppositions, and sometimes even his theory itself, are nowadays to be found in quarters that still imagine themselves to be the bastions of supernaturalism that they always used to be. Presumably the supernaturalists have not admitted this Trojan horse in full knowledge that it swarms inside with antisupernaturalist presuppositions that will eventually overturn

their supernaturalism from the foundations upwards. Rather it would seem that they must have been convinced by Bultmann's original assurance that the strange device, demythologization, would not only prove harmless; it would also prove the only way of preserving the truth of the NT (op. cit., p. 10), the only way of communicating the Gospel to modern man.

And, then, of course, they have been badly frightened. Two great serpents, said to come the one from the god, Science, the other from the goddess, Modern Cosmology, are reported to have crushed the breath out of all attempted resistance, and to have compelled the admittance of de-mythologization. 'Man's knowledge and mastery of the world,' Bultmann reported (op. cit., p. 4) 'have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the NT view of the world—in fact, there is no one who does. And so in many a fortress of supernaturalism, the gates have been opened and demythologization dragged in. But before the gates are finally closed and all unsuspecting go off to sleep, had we not better question our modern Sinai a bit more closely. It could be that both his assurance and his story about the god of Science are themselves part of a disreputable myth.

Let us take first Bultmann's original assurance. It claimed that it does not matter that science has made it impossible for us to accept Luke's description of the ascension: we have lost nothing of value. We have lost the description, that is all; the truth of the ascension is still ours. The description is mythological; it can be safely discarded without any loss of the truth it enshrines. This assurance sounded very comforting, and many a supernaturalist has taken it at its face value. After all, what sensible man would worry if he had to give up the pretty paper wrappings round his Christmas present so long as he could keep hold of the present itself?

But since Bultmann there has arisen another generation of demythologizers. They agree with Bultmann that much of the NT is mythological, and must be demythologized. But as to Bultmann's assurance that his demythologizing could be done without losing any of the essential truths of the NT, these new demythologizing theologians now tell us that it is false, is, and always has been. Of course, literary men have known all along that Bultmann's assurance involved a prior claim to be able to do the impossible. If Luke's description of the Ascension is a myth, and every other reference to the Ascension in the NT part of the same myth, by what independent criterion could he hope to prove that he could tell us what the truth was that Luke intended by the myth? He might claim he had arrived at this truth; but by what criterion could he possibly prove that this 'truth' was anything other than his own interpretation, arbitrarily imposed on Luke's myth? Never mind the literary men; the demythologizing theologians themselves now tell us that Bultmann's claim that his kind of demythologizing would preserve the essential truths of the NT was false.

So now let us take as an example of the more modern advocates of demythologization, Dr J. D. G. Dunn and his recent article 'Demythologizing—the problem of myth in the New Testament' (in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, Paternoster Press, 1977, pp. 285–307). Dr Dunn lays it down that 'the problem of myth in the NT is that the NT presents events critical to Christian faith in language and concepts which are often outmoded and meaningless to 20th century man. More precisely . . . 'Ascension' (Acts 1:11) and parousia 'in

clouds' 'from heaven' (Mark 13:26; 1 Thess 4:16) were not merely metaphors or analogies, but were intended as literal descriptions, but descriptions which derive from and depend on a first century cosmology which is impossible to us' (p. 300).

Here, then, Dr Dunn repeats and affirms Bultmann's basic contention. Luke's description of the ascension, and much else besides in the NT is mythological. Dr Dunn disagrees with Bultmann on the way this mythology should be demythologized, and with many a shrewd argument, rejects Bultmann's claim to have done it successfully. But that demythologizing of some sort must be done, Dr Dunn accepts unquestioningly. What, then, of Bultmann's claim that in the process of Bultmann's kind of demythologizing, no essential truth of Christianity is lost? Dr Dunn has no doubt: the claim is false.

'Bultmann has been attacked here from two sides,' says Dr Dunn. The two sides, we discover, are Bultmann's own more radical disciples, and critics from the theological right. The latter we will here ignore, for they could be suspected of bias against Bultmann. But not so Bultmann's own disciples. 'He (Bultmann) has been attacked,' explains Dr. Dunn

by his more radical disciples for the illogicality of his stopping place. If the Gospel can be translated into existentialist categories without remainder, why does Bultmann insist on retaining a reference to Christ, and defend so vigorously his right to continue speaking of "God acting in Christ"? If "the self-understanding of the man of faith" is really the constant in the NT, then where does christology properly speaking come in at all? Does Bultmann's flight from history into the kerygma answer the problem of myth, since kerygma itself is mythological . . . Why indeed retain the idea of God at all? Does the first century concept of a cosmologically transcendent God not demythologize existentially into the concept of self-transcendence? (p. 298)

Translate these penetrating questions out of their professional jargon into straightforward English, and they tell us plainly that once you adopt Bultmann's brand of demythologizing, there is no logical stopping place before total abandonment of all talk of God and Christ. Bultmann's assurance to the contrary has proved hollow, witness the demythologizing theologians themselves.

Nevertheless Dr Dunn remains convinced of the truth of Bultmann's basic contention, that much of the NT is mythological, and that demythologizing of some kind must be done. Luke's description of the ascension, he tells us (p. 300), derives from and depends on a first century cosmology which is impossible to us. That being so, it is understandable that laymen should eye Dr Dunn's methodology and interpretations with the greatest of care. Traditionally, to the layman, theologians were the experts whose task it was to expound the histories, doctrines and truths of the NT. But the layman's confidence has been shaken. Professing to tell us what the NT teaches, the old demythologizers denied and destroyed its essential doctrines. Ominously, the new demythologizers are found to share the same premise as the old; only they claim to have discovered a better way of doing the demythologizing. Well, will it really be better? Will it expound the NT's doctrines more accurately and help us to perceive more precisely what the NT is saying? Will it this time succeed in demythologizing the NT without losing or distorting its essential truths?

II

To the layman it is perhaps inevitable that the new method of demythologizing, when he first meets it, should prove disconcerting. Demythologizing is now no longer to be a matter for the experts: it is an activity for Everyman. Indeed, the new demythologizing turns out to be a do-it-yourself- in-whatever-way-it-suits-you- best kind of demythologizing. 'The point is,' says Dr Dunn (p. 301), 'that each must tackle it for himself and no one else can tackle it for him: for in the end of the day it is the problem of how *I* express *my* faith as a Christian.' Undeniably there is a certain attractiveness in this method: toilsome though it be to have to do it yourself, once you have done it you could never be proved wrong. If anyone were to object that you had got your demythologizing wrong, all you would have to do would be to retort, 'But that is what *I* believe', and that, would be the end of the matter. After all, your faith is your faith. And when you have expressed what you believe, who shall say that you don't believe it?

But attractive as this method may be as a device for expressing your faith, that is not exactly what we were looking for. We were enquiring not about your faith, but about what the NT means; and, with due respect, the two things are not necessarily the same. I could not deny that your expression of your faith was true to what you believe; but I might want to question, or even to deny, that your interpretation of the NT was a true interpretation of what the NT says. And if I cannot question that there is an end to all discussion, and we are left with ten thousand and one private statements of belief, none of which can be said to be more right or wrong than any other. What we want to know, then, is how accurate a tool for interpreting the NT this new method of demythologization is. What are its presuppositions, procedures, objectives? And, above all, when the new demythologization has been carried out, shall we be able to say with justifiable confidence, At last we know what the NT has been trying to say all these centuries, and what it means?

Unfortunately not! We must prepare ourselves for surprises, shocks and disappointments. Of the new method's objective, Dr Dunn says,

The more one regards the Christ-event and the faith of the first Christians as normative, the more tightly one is bound to the expressions of the faith and hope of these first Christians as the starting point for the elucidation and interpretation of one's own self-understanding and experience of grace. (p. 301)

So then, not the NT (which may, or may not, be normative), but one's own self-understanding and experience of grace are the chief things to be interpreted. At this, one gets the chilly feeling that a ghost walks. We recall that, for Bultmann, no statement about Christ in the NT was really a statement about Christ: it was a statement about man. The statement 'Christ rose from the dead the third day', referred to no objective historical event other than the rise of faith in the risen Lord in the hearts of certain men (op. cit. p. 42). Statements about Christ were mythological; and 'the real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives' (p. 10). As it shall be in another temple of which we are told (2 Thess 2:4), so for Bultmann: the object of worshipful study in God's temple was not God and his self-revelation, but man and his

self-understanding. As one hears what the objective of the new demythologizing is, the impression that Bultmann's ghost still walks is almost irresistible.

But perhaps our fears are groundless. Perhaps, after all, the objective of the new method is simply to be practical. All would agree that biblical exegesis is not properly an end in itself: it is right that it should have some form of applied theology as its aim. But even if the NT is going to be no more than the starting point in this applied theology, it still remains of prime importance to interpret the starting point correctly. If the starting point be not understood correctly, how can we have confidence in the results of the investigations which proceed from it? We must, then, insist on asking: how well does the new method of demythologizing preserve, interpret and present the essential truths of the NT? Here is the answer.

Dr Dunn says (p. 301),

The process of demythologizing is therefore a dialectic between me in all my 20th century conditionedness and the faith of the first Christians in all its first century conditionedness. Such a dialectic is not a once-for-all question and answer from one to another, but a continuing dialogue of question and answer where each repeatedly puts the other in question and where one wrestles existentially with the text and with oneself till an answer begins to emerge—an answer which passes a further question in reply. Nor is it a dialogue which involves only my voice and the voice of the past, since it is only part of the wider human search for reality and truth and other voices break in posing other questions and offering other answers. Nor is it a dialogue which can ever reach finality of form or expression, since each man's question is peculiarly his own and, since 19th century gives way to 20th century, and 20th begins to give way to 21st, and each new generation has its own agenda; rather is it a dialogue which must be taken up ever afresh by each believer and by each believing community. In short, the dialectic of demythologizing is the language of living faith.

Alas for our hopes of ever understanding what the essential truths of NT are! Bultmann's method of demythologizing eliminated these truths. The new method disapproves of that, but for its part assures us that the question, What are the essential truths of the NT? can never be answered. And that for the following reasons. First, no two people ever ask the NT the same question: each man's question is peculiarly his own. Therefore, there is not one answer to our question, but as many different answers as there are people to ask questions. Secondly, no final once-for-all answer is ever given to any one man's question, but only statements that provoke further questions and so an *ad infinitum*. Like the myths and endless genealogies of which Paul complained (1 Tim 1:4) the NT itself simply 'minsters questionings' and never final answers.

Well, whatever else must be said about the new method, one thing can be said at once: the new method is not new at all. It turns out to be simply an extreme version of subjective relativism, and relativism has been with us for a very long while. In recent decades, for instance, it was the position taken up by the Cambridge School of English Studies, as Dr G. Watson has recently reminded us ('The Discipline of English', Macmillan, London, 1978); but long long ago, before ever relativism troubled the Cambridge School, it was being proclaimed by the first and greatest sophist of the Enlightenment in Greece in the fifth century BC, Protagoras himself. 'Man is the measure of all things,' Protagoras declared; and it is not

difficult to catch echoes of his creed in the declared assumptions both of Bultmann and of the new demythologizers. But what people have always wanted to know about Protagoras is, Why did he profess to be able to teach people anything and take money for it into the bargain? If there are no universal truths to be acknowledged by all men, but truth is for each man whatever seems to him to be true, how could anyone teach another anything? And we may ask the new demythologizers the same thing. If, as they themselves say, each man must do his own demythologizing, and no man can do it for him; and if there are, and can be, no universal answers since each man's question is peculiarly his own, and the answers that each demythologizer gets from the NT are all different from every other answer given to every other demythologizer; then, why do demythologizers trouble to lecture and write books?

The next thing that can be said about the new demythologizing is that if its interpretation of the NT results in a chaos of subjective relativism, this is no more than was to be expected, in view of its presupposition that the NT, before it is interpreted, is itself a mass of subjective opinions. Did Dr Dunn believe in the traditional sense, or in any sense at all, that Scripture is God's self-revelation to men, then it would be absurd for him to deny that God could give us in the NT final answers, universally valid for all time. But Dr Dunn does not believe that in the NT we have God's Word. He believes that what we have here is simply 'the faith of the first Christians' (p. 301). Behind that faith, he holds, there lay something that may be called 'the Christ-event'; but the NT's account of that event, of the resurrection, of the appearances, and of the ascension, is not reportage, not even reportage of the limited objectivity of, say, the Daily Telegraph (or the Morning Star) describing the coronation of the Queen. It is no more than the expression of the faith of the first Christians. And in his book 'Unity and Diversity in the New Testament' (S.C.M. Press 1977), Dr Dunn tells us that the faith of the first Christians, while possessing a common core, is for the rest a mass of mutually incompatible ideas, which arose as each NT writer came to his own subjective interpretation of the Christ-event. If this, then, is held to be the nature of the NT before it is demythologized, and if it then has to be demythologized according to highly individualistic, relativistic principles, there is no wonder that there can be no universally valid answer to the question, What are the essential truths of the NT?

The next thing, however, that must be said about the extreme relativism of the new demythologists is that it just is not true. 'Each man's question,' says Dr Dunn (p. 301), 'is peculiarly his own'. That is patently false. Thousands of people (many known to me personally) have asked, and still do ask, exactly the same question, Where is Jesus Christ now? The question has not, in spite of what Dr Dunn says, varied as one century has given way to another. It is still the same today as ever it was. Nor does the NT give a number of mutually incompatible answers. Everywhere and consistently its answer is, He has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. And millions of Christians all down the centuries have found the answer satisfying and final, and millions still do. And what is more, these millions would claim to understand what the answer 'in heaven' means. They understand from the NT that besides our visible universe there is another world, normally invisible to us, in which the presence of God is experienced immediately. They would not claim to know very much about the nature of that world, or of its relation to our world, and they might like to put to the NT endless questions about it. On the other hand, they are perfectly ready to accept the NT's reply

that, except for certain basic matters, the nature of that world cannot be expressed in the language and concepts presently available to human beings in this world (2 Cor 12:1–4). They do not proceed to ‘wrestle existentially with the text and with themselves till an answer begins to emerge’. They are content to be told, because it seems to them altogether reasonable and to be expected, that they would not understand answers were any attempted. And still, and for all that, they continue to regard the original answer ‘in heaven’, as a final and universally valid answer, that makes perfect sense as it stands.

In this they are wise people. If a stage savage asked his visiting social anthropologist, how the Queen of England cooks her meat, he would be told ‘with electricity’. The answer would be final and universally valid for all stone-age savages (and social anthropologists as well).

If the savage asked what the electricity was, he might be told that it is a special kind of ‘fire’, in some respects like the fire he himself knew and used, but in other respects very different—in that, for instance, it does not involve flame, and while it causes heat, it is not itself hot, and can be turned off and on by simply flicking a switch. If the savage went further and asked what is the essential nature of electricity, the reply might have to be that he could not be told. He would be a foolish man if on that score he concluded that the original answer ‘With electricity’ was not a universally valid, once-for-all answer, (and still more foolish if he thought that no two savages could put to the anthropologist the same question, How does the Queen cook her meat?). If ever the day arrived when some scientist was able to explain to him the essential nature of matter and energy, the original answer would still stand as valid as it ever was: the Queen would still be cooking with electricity. Meanwhile, if the savage argued that the anthropologist’s descriptions were so fairy-story-like that they must be based on some primitive mythology unacceptable to the modern savage, the anthropologist would reply: ‘But I know. I come from a land where electricity is very common and I have myself seen thousands of electric fires and ovens. One day I will take you to that land and you will see for yourself. Meanwhile you must trust me, and if you do, you may know on my authority that there is a ‘fire’ called electricity, and there is a land where it is, in daily use’. And if the savage decided to believe the anthropologist, he would not know everything about electricity, but that would not mean that the term ‘electricity’ would have no meaning for him. It would mean a kind of fire, in some ways similar to the fire he used, but in other ways mysteriously different, which the Queen of a distant land and all her subjects used to cook with.

The question, therefore, would resolve itself into one of the anthropologist’s authority and reliability. And that is precisely how it is with us and Christ. ‘Amen, amen, I tell you’ said Christ to Nicodemus (John 3:11–13),

that we are speaking about what we know, and testifying of what we have seen; and you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about things on earth and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about things in heaven? And no one has ascended into heaven except the One who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man.

From this it is apparent first, how ancient is disbelief in Christ’s statements about heaven, and, next, how little it has to do with modern science. But it is equally clear that we cannot go on calling ourselves Christians, if we in fact stand with the great majority in rejecting Christ’s testimony.

III

At this demythologizers, old and new, (if any have persevered in reading so far) will probably throw up their hands in disgust. They will say, either that I have fundamentally misunderstood what they are saying, or else that, through lack of logic (or perhaps through deliberate perversity), I have misinterpreted their position. In the first place, they do not believe that Jesus ever said the words which John puts in his mouth. All talk in John's Gospel, and elsewhere in the NT, of Christ's pre-existence, his coming down from, and ascent into, heaven, is simply 'the expressions of the faith and hope of the first Christians the faith of the first Christians in all its first century conditionedness' (Dunn, p. 301); it is not the testimony of one who has indeed 'come down' from heaven. What is more, they do not believe that any being from heaven could ever have stood on our earth and said in John's words 'I came down from heaven', for the simple reason that they do not believe that in the sense in which John uses the word there is any such heaven for any such being to come down from. 'No one,' says Bultmann, 'who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a local heaven. There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the word' (p. 4). 'Out of date conceptions', says Dr Dunn (p. 300),

determine certain traditionally important expressions of NT faith about Christ at this point—in particular . . . "ascension" (Acts 1:11) and parousia "in clouds" "from heaven" (Mark 13:26; 1 Thess. 4:16), were not merely metaphors or analogies, but were intended as literal descriptions, but descriptions which derive from, and depend on, a first century cosmology which is impossible to us.

And, therefore, when we ask, Where is Christ now? and the NT answers, He has ascended into heaven, for the demythologizers this is not only not a final answer, it is not really an answer at all: for, in its literal sense, they just cannot, and do not, believe it. And it is this that makes the dialectic of demythologization necessary. They freely admit that demythologization can never yield a final answer, but only statements and replies that provoke further questions. But without demythologization, they maintain there would not even be questions, replies and further questions. There would simply be the original statement of the NT that Christ ascended into heaven which, being clearly intended as a literal description, they just as clearly reject as altogether incredible.

Well, if people do not believe that there exists a heaven in the sense in which John, Luke, Paul and the rest of the NT speaks of it, and in which according to them all Christ spoke of it, then we must accept their statement: they do not believe. Let the matter rest there.

But the demythologizers will not let it rest there. They are concerned for those of us who do believe. Bultmann warns us (p. 4) that for a modern scientifically minded man (and are we not all that?), to believe Luke's description of the Ascension would be to run the risk of 'a curious form of schizophrenia and insincerity'. Dr Dunn is milder in his language, but none the less concerned. Believers in Luke's description of the Ascension are attempting to do what is for modern man impossible. Luke's description, he tells us (p. 300), derives from and depends on a first century cosmology. The cosmology was wrong, fanciful, unreal. Then the description must be false. The ascension did not take place as Luke describes it. To attempt to

believe it did, is to believe an unreality, and believing in known unrealities is impossible for modern man (for anybody, we should have thought). Obviously, then, we must be dissuaded from attempting the impossible: we must not believe Luke's description of the ascension.

Then what are we to do with it? Let Dr Dunn tell us

. . . . one must always seek to rediscover afresh the reality of the love and faith and hope which these words expressed, and then seek to re-express that reality in language meaningful to one's own experience and to one's neighbour. (p. 301)

So Luke's description expresses that 'a reality of faith': something which he really believed and presumably something which was really true. How else could it be a reality? But, whatever else Luke believed, did he not really believe that the ascension took place as he said it did? For him surely it was a 'reality of faith': he really believed it happened. But we have just been told that it did not happen as he thought it did. He really believed, but it was believing in an unreality. Nonetheless his unreal description expresses a 'reality of faith'. How shall we resolve the conundrum? Easily. His description is not intended literally, it is a metaphor or analogy. We may then reject the Ascension as a literal event, but accept the reality that the metaphor conveys.

No, says Dr Dunn. That's the trouble. If his description were merely intended as a metaphor or analogy, there would be no problem. 'The problem . . . is . . . that "ascension" (Acts 1:11) and parousia "in clouds" "from heaven" (Mark 13:26; 1 Thess. 4:16) were not merely metaphors or analogies but were intended as literal descriptions' (p. 301).

How then does Luke's description of the Ascension, intended as literal description, but false and unreal, express a reality of faith? It manages to do that, Dr Dunn explains, by being a theological statement. Talk of ascension is an example of first century theologizing (p. 301).

We get the idea. Luke started by believing something or other about Christ. As yet we cannot say what that something was; to discover that we must first demythologize the theological statement which he subsequently used to express whatever it was that he originally believed. But whatever it was, for him it was a reality of faith, something that he really believed, and something that was really true of Christ. Then he decided that other people ought to know about this reality: he had a duty to express it. He decided that the best way to communicate this reality was to make a theological statement. So he invented (or took over from some other inventor) a story of a literal ascension witnessed by apostles. He then managed to convince himself that this invented story was literally true, and in its turn it came to be for him a reality of faith. This second reality of faith he then offered as an expression of the reality of whatever it was that he originally believed. Unfortunately the second reality was not true, it was only a theological statement. Our job is to take this theological statement, untrue as to the facts as it is, and rediscover what the original reality was which this unreality was meant to express.

Difficult, you say. Very difficult, says Dr Dunn: for 'if such first century theologizing as . . . talk of . . . ascension can no longer have the same meaning for us as it had for the first Christians, what meaning should "it have"?' (p. 301). Well, we reply, whatever meaning you decide to give it as a result of your demythologization, it will not be of any use in determining

Luke's meaning: you have just told yourself — that it can no longer be the meaning which Luke intended. It will be a different meaning.

How then shall we ever do what we were told we must do? How are we to discover the 'reality of faith' that Luke's 'theologizing' description of the Ascension expresses? What a man believes in his heart we can only know if he expresses it in words. If his words cannot have the same meaning for us as they had for him, to try to discover what he believes is to attempt the impossible.

And that is only the first impossibility; there is another. We are told that we must try to rediscover the reality of faith that Luke's description of the ascension expresses. At the same time we are told that the literal ascension was for him a reality of faith, but, alas, it was not real. His faith was mistaken. The ascension did not take place as he believed; and of course his description, therefore, cannot have the same meaning for us as it did for him. Well then, however did we know in the first place that behind his false description of the ascension there was a reality of faith, and not simply another instance of first century theologizing, equally unacceptable to modern man as the literal description of the ascension, and equally in need of demythologization, before we can know what it really means, and so on in infinite regression? If we know independently of Luke that there was a reality of faith behind his description, and if independently of him we know what it was, and that it was a genuine reality, then we may spare ourselves the arduous toil of demythologizing his description. But if we are dependent on Luke's description in order to know what reality of faith lay behind it, it is impossible for us to know in advance that there was genuine reality of faith behind the description.

Bultmann, we remember, warned us against attempting an impossibility: it could induce schizophrenia and insincerity. But the new method of demythologizing unashamedly requires us to attempt two; and that is high price to pay for a method of exegesis which on its own confession derives from Luke's writings a meaning which *ex hypothesi* cannot be the same meaning as Luke intended. It is useless to urge us in this situation to engage in the dialectic of demythologization with the text until 'an answer begins to emerge' (where from? we wonder). If the demythologizers are going to reduce our study of Scripture to the level of a Socratic dialogue in which some Greek who does not know the truth carries on a dialogue with Socrates who freely confesses that he does not know the truth either, in the hope that ignorant Greek and ignorant Socrates may together by means of dialectic pursue their quest until an answer begins to emerge; even so, it is necessary that the ignorant Greek should understand exactly what Socrates means by his questions, answers and tentative definitions.

Dialectic is the last method on earth for finding out the truth if by definition your interlocutor's words and expressions cannot have the same meaning for you as they have for him.

As a tool for interpreting the essential truths of the NT, the new method of demythologizing is no more to be trusted than the old. Its counsels are the counsels of despair. If then we ask what drives professional exegetes of outstanding intellectual powers, such as Dr Dunn, to embrace this method and urge its use upon us, with one voice they all answer, Modern cosmology. The answer is so startling, and on the face of it so very much like a slander, that, if only for the sake of the reputation of cosmology, we ought to investigate it very closely indeed.

IV

The charge brought against Luke's description of the ascension runs as follows. Says Bultmann (p. 4)

Man's knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the NT view of the world What meaning, for instance, can we attach to such phrases in the creed as 'descended into hell' [Bultmann surely knew that no such phrase appears in the NT] or 'ascended into heaven'? We no longer believe in the three-storied universe which the creeds take for granted There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the word. The same applies to hell, in the sense of a mythical world under our feet. And if this is so, the story of Christ 's descent into hell, and of his Ascension into heaven is done with. We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven, or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air (1 Thess. 4:15ff).

Says Dr. Dunn (p. 300):

. . . 'ascension' . . . and parousia 'in clouds' 'from heaven' . . . were intended as literal descriptions, but descriptions which derive from and depend on a first century cosmology which is impossible to us.

The charge is not only serious: apparently it is certain. Here there is no 'wrestling with the text existentially here until an answer begins to emerge', which turns out to be not a final answer but simply an occasion for further questions. No room here either for each man to put his own peculiar question to the text and get back his own peculiar answer. No, Luke's description derives from, and depends on, a first century cosmology. The demythologizers have said so: and they expect it to be universally accepted as axiomatic. Moreover, not only can they tell us that the description derived from first century cosmology: they can tell us from which particular first century cosmology it was derived. There were, as we all know, several cosmologies current in the first century AD. The Stoics had theirs, the Epicureans another. Two centuries earlier, the learned Aristarchus of Samoa had put forth his heliocentric system; and doubtless the mass of people, both educated and uneducated, were as vague in their thinking about cosmology as their counterparts are today. But out of all these systems the demythologizers can tell us that Luke was very precise in this cosmological thinking and held the 'three-decker' theory of cosmology: heaven above, hell below, and earth in the middle.

If we ask how they can possibly know this with such certainty, the answer is that they deduce it from Luke's description of the ascension. When he depicts our Lord on his way to heaven, he has him rising up from the earth into the sky; which shows he must have held a cosmology in which heaven lies above earth. Had he depicted Christ moving westward instead of going up, you could have deduced that he held a cosmology in which heaven lay, like some Elysian fields, in the far-west of a flat earth.

But there is a snag. Deducing which cosmology Luke held from his description of the ascension is perfectly valid, if and only if, you know for certain that he made up his story, and that it was derived from a first century cosmology. If, in fact, he was simply recording what

actually happened before the astonished eyes of the apostles, without any regard for whatever cosmological system his description might fit into, then cosmological deduction from his description would be highly dubious. How then do the demythologizers know with such certainty, before they start their deductions, that the description was derived from a first century cosmology? For notice that the demythologizers are not content to say that in describing the Ascension, Luke has borrowed terms from some first century cosmology. A stone-age savage, suddenly whisked away to Cape Canaveral, to witness the ascent of a manned space rocket, might well on his return describe the rocket's ascent to his fellows in terms taken from the cosmology favoured by stone-age savages. That would not mean, however, that his description was a fiction derived from this cosmology: far from it, the description would be derived from the actual ascent of the rocket. How, we repeat, do the demythologizers manage to know in advance that Luke's description is a fiction derived from some first century cosmology?

The answer seems to be that it is self-evidently a fiction. Luke depicts Christ entering heaven by ascending up into the sky, because Luke really thought that heaven was up in the sky somewhere. But we now know that there is no heaven up in the sky, and that Christ could not have reached heaven by journeying up through space. Therefore, what Luke describes could not have happened. Luke is caught out like a criminal who has used an alibi which he did not realise was actually impossible.

But Luke does not say that Christ reached heaven simply by journeying up into the sky. If we look at what Luke actually says (Acts 1:9), instead of contenting ourselves with other people's paraphrases of what he says, we shall find that Christ's 'journey to heaven' involved two stages. First, 'while they were looking, he was taken up'. That part involved a literal physical ascent into the air; and that part of the journey they saw: it happened 'while they were looking'. But there was a second stage which Luke himself tells us that they did not see: 'a cloud received him out of their sight'. What happened then, and how the passage from our world to the other world was affected, Luke does not attempt to describe, or even claim to know. Nor does he speculate on the nature of the cloud that removed—Christ from the apostle's sight any more than he does on the nature of that other cloud which removed Moses and Elijah from sight on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:34–35) and from which Peter solemnly affirms that he literally and physically heard the divine voice speaking (2 Pet 1:12–18)—and adds that, in recording the fact, he is not telling a myth (1:16).

Now it is at once evident that Luke's description of the removal of Moses and Elijah from the apostles' sight is not in any way derived from a first century cosmology. The demythologizers, to be sure, will not believe the story any more for that. At best, they will regard it as another myth, and attribute it to who-knows-what Jewish or Roman or Hellenistic source. Never mind: the point remains that the account has nothing to do with cosmology *sensu stricta*. Nothing could be deduced from it as to what particular cosmology, if any, Luke held. And the same is true about Luke's description of Christ's comings and goings after the Resurrection and before the final Ascension. From the home at Emmaus (Luke 24:31), he simply vanished instantaneously. Later he suddenly appeared (24:35), and comings and goings of this sort continued, according to Acts 1:3, throughout a period of forty days. Why this final departure was preceded by a physical ascent into the air, we must consider in a

moment; but it is clear that Luke did not imagine that physical ascent into the air was the one and only necessary way for Christ to pass from our world into heaven. It is false, therefore, to suppose that Luke invented the story of the physical ascent because he believed in a three-decker universe, in which the only way to get to heaven would be to travel up through the sky.

If Luke's description of the ascension, then, is not derived from first century cosmology, neither is it rendered incredible by the findings of modern cosmology. Modern cosmology has an enormous amount to tell us about the universe (yet how little is known); but it cannot, and does not, presume to tell us that there is no other world or worlds outside our universe, or that there is no other world, or worlds, co-incident with and inter-penetrating our universe, but not observable by the techniques available to cosmologists. Still less can it teach us that there is no created world where the presence of God, as the NT indicates by its analogy with the tabernacle (Heb 6:19–20; 8:2–5; 9:1–12, 23–28; 10:19–22), is perceived and experienced more immediately than it is in our world.

But let us come to the very heart of the matter, the central truths of God's self-revelation, as we have them in Scripture: that God transcends space and time, since he created them; that the Son, being of the same nature as the Father, and therefore transcending space and time, nevertheless condescended at the Incarnation to become involved in space and time, without the loss of the divine transcendence; and that the Son's ascension 'far above all things' (Eph 4:10), 'where he was before' (John 6:62) does not mean the loss of his incarnational involvement with space and time. No one pretends that it is easy to comprehend the great truths that are made known to us by this revelation, or to find terms and concepts in which to talk about them adequately. But, without doubt, the central issue is whether we believe that God, who is transcendent, can make room for himself in the time and space which he has created or not. Bultmann held that he could not and therefore demanded that all statements in Scripture that imply that he can, and has and will, must be understood as myth, because they cannot be understood literally. But Bultmann's denial of the possibility has clearly nothing to do with modern cosmology. If cosmology of any kind has influenced Bultmann in this matter, then as Professor T. F. Torrance has suggested (*Space, Time and Incarnation*, Oxford, 1969, reprint 1978, p. 49) it may be that it was the old Lutheran receptacle notion of space that troubled him. The real cause of his inability to accept the Biblical statements of God's presence and activity within space and time as literal statements, was not cosmology, certainly not modern cosmology, but 'his deistic assumption that God does not interact with this world, which he regarded as a closed continuum of cause and effect'.

And when we come to the other element in Luke's description of the ascension, the preliminary rising up into the air before the disappearance, it is clear that if we understand it literally, and we believe it, we are professing belief in miracle. Many modern men certainly confess themselves to be unable to believe in miracle. But it is not science, at least not true science, that makes them unable. Science can tell us that statistically miracles are exceedingly improbable; but we knew that already by definition. Not all the branches of science combined, let alone modern cosmology by itself, could tell us that miracles cannot happen. Whether any miracles at all, or the miracle of the ascent in particular, have ever taken place is a historical, and not a scientific, question.

V

It is our contention, then, that Luke's description of the ascension was not derived from a first century cosmology: it is simply a description of what happened. Its first stage, the ascent into the air, does not imply that Luke believed in a three-decker universe in which in order to get to heaven, one had to journey up through the sky. On other occasions, Christ vanished into that other world without any preliminary rising into the air.

Why, then, at the ascension, we may ask, was his disappearance preceded by a preliminary physical ascent? Two possible answers suggest themselves.

In Luke's account (Acts 1:6–11), our Lord's ascent happened while he was answering the apostles question, 'Is it at this time that you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' Indeed, it was itself, as we shall see, part of his answer. What had provoked this question in their minds was the fact that, not only had Christ risen from the dead, leaving behind an empty tomb; but the one who had left them by death, had come back to them several times in the course of the forty days. For all they knew, these 'comings' might have gone on occurring indefinitely: and it was natural for them to expect that one of these comings might turn out to be the great coming, prophesied by the OT, which should restore the kingdom to Israel. Moreover, their hopes along this line were increased by the promise that, in a few days' time, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, promised by Ezekiel, and Joel, should take place. Christ, therefore, had not only to indicate to them in words that the restoration of Israel would not take place yet, but also to demonstrate to them that the great coming that would bring about the restoration of Israel, would be different from the comings and goings of the forty days. In them, the appearances and the disappearings were instantaneous with no preliminary warning or indication. The manner of the great coming will be different. And to demonstrate it, our Lord, before disappearing, rose up into the air before their astonished eyes, and angels came to point out the lesson it was meant to convey: 'this Jesus . . . shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven'.

Experience has subsequently shown that the demonstration was not unnecessary. We are told by some that the description of the Parousia when 'he comes with clouds and every eye shall see him' (Rev 1:7), must not be taken literally. All it really means is that Christ 'comes' in the great crises of history. No one sees him come, no one sees him go, there is nothing for anyone, believer or unbeliever, to see, and many people remain unconvinced that he has come at all. But to interpret the descriptions of the Parousia thus, is to deny the precise point that, according to the angels, the token demonstration of the preliminary ascent was intended to teach.

The second answer to our question is not one that Scripture itself gives. It may not, therefore, be right. It is worth putting it forward as a suggestion, however, if only as a means of clarifying a prevalent confusion. The suggestion is that the preliminary ascent into the air may have been intended as symbolical of the ascension in the higher sense of that word. The confusion is that many people think that if an event described in Scripture can be shown to have symbolic meaning, it follows that the event is not to be regarded as a literal, physical, historical event. But events can be both literal and symbolic. If a child is told that in such and such a year Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne, he may imagine that the phrase 'ascended the throne' means 'climbed up and eat on a big chair'. He will have to be told that that is not

what the phrase means in this context. It has a bigger meaning. The child, if badly taught, might then conclude that there is no literal big chair, and that the Queen never literally climbs up and sits on it. He would be wrong again. There is, and she does.

About the Author

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