

Varieties of Resurrection

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During the last decade a large number of books on the resurrection have appeared, which reflect a wide range of theological perspectives. What is puzzling is not that there should have been such an interest in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but that the interpretations should have been so various. Why is there no unanimity of understanding concerning the resurrection? After all it is an event that is described in only a few short texts; why do exegetes find it so difficult to interpret these texts? The previous sentence, however, has already introduced us to some of the problems involved in this extremely complex hermeneutical situation. Is the resurrection an event? and is it (can it be) described in the New Testament? Exegetes and dogmatic theologians differ over these problems as much as over their understanding of the texts, and yet what is the relation of such questions as these to the linguistic content of the texts?

These reflections are prompted by the publication of an English translation of an interpretation of the texts concerning the resurrection by the distinguished French exegete Xavier Léon-Dufour.¹ The bulk of Léon-Dufour's book is presented as a straightforward interpretation of the texts, from the christological hymn of Philippians 2.6-11 and other Pauline and pseudo-Pauline literature to the major texts of 1 Corinthians 15 and the closing chapters of each of the Gospels. Léon-Dufour offers an interpretation of the meaning of the texts not only in the limited literal sense but also in the wider context of the whole gospel message of each of the evangelists. One has the impression of an exegete with a distinguished past moving towards the end of a career and wanting to make a final statement on that most important of 'events'. And yet, while the book is painstaking and systematic in true Gallic fashion, the bibliography (which is also very inconsistent in the information it gives on English translations) omits any mention of authors who would be considered essential reading in Britain, authors such as Barth, Christopher Evans, Louis Evely, Lloyd Geering, Moltmann and Pannenberg. There is a final chapter on 'Hermeneutics' which raises one's hopes that the really critical questions will be asked and maybe even answered. But, apart from the first half dozen pages, that chapter has very little to do with hermeneutics, partly because the author has accepted unquestioningly the very questionable view of Fuchs and Ebeling that the task of hermeneutics is to translate or re-express the ancient message of the New Testament into language which

¹X. Léon-Dufour, *Resurrection and the Message of Easter*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1974, pp. xxii + 330, paper £2.95.

can be understood by modern man. So most of Léon-Dufour's last chapter is spent in translating the message of the resurrection instead of asking on what basis we can understand the texts in the first place and asking how this understanding in fact takes place. This 'hermeneutical' process of translation is presented as a postlude to the understanding and interpretation of the texts, and the assumption is clearly that the texts are readily understandable in their own terms on the basis of historical and philological information. Yet is the process of understanding a text from a past epoch so easy, so straightforward or so objective? For example, Léon-Dufour, when he wants to talk about the resurrection, has to use the following language which has certainly not been derived from the texts:

In so far as it is rising from the dead and lifting up to be with God, the resurrection is not a historical fact, even though the believer apprehends it as a real fact. To express this, we may coin a neologism and say that the resurrection as such is a *trans-historical* event, so reserving the term historical to what can be known by science, and leaving history open to matters other than scientific facts.²

It is, however, by no means clear what Léon-Dufour means by either 'history' or 'trans-history' and so it is not clear what he means by 'resurrection'. He also betrays epistemological assumptions in his distinction between 'history' and 'science' which need justification. All that is clear is that the resurrection is an event (though what sort of event?) which is neither historical nor non-historical. R. H. Fuller has used a similar expression which is only a little clearer in this passage:

By this [the statement that the resurrection has a meta-historical character] we do not mean to suggest that nothing has transpired between God and Jesus, but rather that what took place between God and Jesus took place at the boundary between history and meta-history, between this age and the age to come. As such, the resurrection leaves only a negative mark within history: 'he is not here' (Mark 16.6). The positive aspect 'he was raised' is not an event within history, but an event beginning at the end of history, and extending into the beyond-history. It is an event which can be known, not by direct observation, but only, as we shall see, by indirect revelatory disclosure within history.³

This use of 'trans-history', 'meta-history' and 'beyond-history' inevitably reminds one of Barth's 'Urgeschichte' (primal history) which he used in his commentary on *Romans* and in his first work on dogmatics.⁴ Barth has the advantage that he is more precise and specific in the way he uses the term, a term he borrowed from Overbeck, but even he felt bound to abandon it by the time he started the *Church Dogmatics* after it had been subjected to widespread criticism. Even though he did abandon the word *Urgeschichte*, however, it is questionable that he ever succeeded in fundamentally altering his views on the historical nature of the resurrection. In his mature work on the concept of history

²*Ibid.*, p. 196.

³R. H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, New York, 1971, p. 23.

⁴K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by E. C. Hoskyns, London, 1933; *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, Munich, 1927.

he still held the resurrection apart from history in so far as he wanted to preserve the event from historical criticism. Barth wrote that the post-resurrection appearances :

are not meant to be taken as 'history' in our sense of the word. . . . For they are describing an event beyond the reach of historical research or depiction. Hence we have no right to analyse or harmonise them.⁵

The resurrection happened, but there is no historical evidence for it; there is only the claim of the Word of God that it happened.⁶

While Léon-Dufour, Fuller and Barth all agree in taking the resurrection out of history and away from historical research without denying that something happened in the past, Bultmann presupposes that the resurrection cannot have had anything to do with the past, with history in the common sense (*Historie*). Bultmann has written :

An historical fact which involves the resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable!⁷

Bultmann has attempted to interpret the New Testament entirely in terms of self-understanding. The New Testament must be understood existentially, that is, as it illuminates the understanding of the reader's own self in the present. Consequently the message that Jesus has been raised from the dead is not a message about past history or possible future history, but it is an interpretation of the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus *for me*.

Indeed faith in the resurrection is really the same thing as faith in the saving efficacy of the cross, faith in the cross as the cross of Christ.⁸

The resurrection, for Bultmann, is the same as the cross of Christ, and the cross is the non-historical event which is the personal appropriation of the significance of the historical crucifixion of Jesus. It is because the significance of Jesus's death is expressed in the Church's preaching that Bultmann can say that Jesus 'rose into the proclamation'.⁹ Whereas for Fuller the resurrection of Jesus took place between history and meta-history, according to Bultmann *we* are raised up when we belong to Christ and this resurrection-life lies between time and eternity.¹⁰

Marxsen has similarly disposed of the historicity of the resurrection by suggesting that 'Jesus is risen' is an interpretative statement which explains why the Church began and has continued to preach the gospel of Christ, and secondarily it relates the historical preaching of Jesus to the later preaching of the Church. It is an interpretative statement—one of many—itsself without factual content, which links

⁵*Church Dogmatics*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, Edinburgh, 1932, p. 452.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 446.

⁷R. K. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology' in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. by H-W. Bartsch, trans. by R. H. Fuller, London, 1972, I, p. 39.

⁸*Ibid.*, I, p. 41.

⁹'The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus' in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ*, ed. by C. Braaten and R. Harrisville, New York, 1964, p. 42.

¹⁰Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* in *Faith and Understanding*, trans. by L. P. Smith, London, 1969, p. 93f.

together these two facts of the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the Church. The resurrection of Jesus is in no sense an historical event for Marxsen but it is a way of understanding the life and preaching of the Church. It would seem that Marxsen's primary interest is in the mission (or 'function') of the Church and it would be interesting to know why.¹¹

On the other hand, Pannenberg has proposed that the resurrection of Jesus is a past historical event which happened at a specific place and time (inside the tomb near Jerusalem after Good Friday and before Easter Sunday morning). No one observed the resurrection, except Jesus who experienced it, but the finding of the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the Apostles and others are concrete bits of historical information which can be used to demonstrate the probability that something happened in the tomb which the Church has always called 'the resurrection of Jesus'. The language used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 is metaphorical language which attempts to give a rough idea of what has happened to Jesus and what will happen to the followers of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the proleptic happening of the general resurrection and is a legitimation of his previous teaching and activity which had come to such a tragic end at Calvary.¹²

Can all or any of these various interpretations pretend to be derived directly from the New Testament texts? Can we claim that any of them are objective readings of the texts? To ask this last question is to approach the problem in the wrong way, for there can be no purely objective interpretation of a text. Understanding is not like that. It is always a subject who approaches a text and who understands a text within an historical tradition and in a social and autobiographical context. One of the major achievements of philosophical hermeneutics is the analysis of the hermeneutical circle which claims that understanding is a circular process between the reader and his world and the text and its world in which understanding is increasingly deepened and clarified.¹³ We approach a text with presuppositions, with a pre-understanding of concepts which will be found in the text or which will be related to the content of the text. This pre-understanding both illuminates the text and will be subjected to criticism by the reader in the light of what the text says. Now, it is sometimes said (by Marxsen and Cullman, for example¹⁴) that we do indeed come to a text with presuppositions, but it is claimed that the presence of these presuppositions is regrettable and should be excluded so far as possible. But it is not possible; we cannot come to the text with a blank mind, nor should we try. We can understand the text only in the light of the pre-under-

¹¹W. Marxsen, 'The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical and Theological Problem' in *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ*, ed. by C. F. D. Moule, London, 1968, pp. 15-50.

¹²W. Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man*, trans. by D. Priebe and L. L. Wilkins, London, 1968, pp. 88-106; and 'The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth' in *Theology as History*, ed. by J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb, New York, 1967, pp. 101-134; and 'Response to the Discussion', *ibid.*, pp. 221-276.

¹³H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen, 1972, pp. 284-290 and 356-360.

¹⁴W. Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. by Margaret Kohl, London, 1970, p. 23f; and O. Cullmann, *Salvation as History*, trans. by S. G. Sowers, London, 1967, pp. 64-74.

standing which we bring to the text. In the present context of understanding the resurrection of Jesus, we bring to the New Testament texts a pre-understanding of the concept of 'resurrection'. Not only that, for the hermeneutical role of pre-understanding is much more complex, we bring a pre-understanding of various other concepts such as 'history', 'eschatology' and 'revelation'. With each of these concepts there can be a variety of ways of understanding them and we have to choose which is to be our understanding before we can offer a final interpretation of the texts. These concepts form a matrix upon which we interpret the texts concerning the resurrection.

When Bultmann says that the resurrection of the dead cannot be an historical event he is not approaching the text objectively. He has a prior understanding of 'resurrection' and of 'history' whereby the one excludes the other. Bultmann, however, should not be criticised for bringing a pre-understanding of these concepts to bear on the text, but for bringing an unsatisfactory form of pre-understanding, one which should be subjected to severe criticism both in its own right and in the light of the content of the New Testament texts. Pannenberg is at least on safer ground when he claims that the resurrection *may* have been an historical event—whether he succeeds in justifying this claim each reader must determine for himself. In the same way, any exegete will come to the text with a prior understanding of 'history' and it is clear that Léon-Dufour has done this when he uses the word 'trans-historical'. But this reflects a view of 'history' which is complex and which is never explained in his book, and it needs to be justified as being a reasonable concept of 'history' in itself and a concept which helps to interpret the New Testament texts satisfactorily. For the process of understanding remains circular; pre-understanding opens up the meaning of the text and such a provisional understanding of the text should in turn subject one's pre-understanding to criticism. Only in this way can a final critical interpretation of a text be proposed, possibly after many readings of the text and much criticism. It is precisely these different forms of pre-understanding, rather than differences of historical and philological evidence, which is the cause of the present variety of interpretations of the resurrection. It is precisely a hermeneutical analysis of the role that pre-understanding has to play, together with a critical account of the various possible pre-conceptions of 'resurrection' in particular, that is consistently absent from books on the resurrection. And Léon-Dufour's book is no exception.