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THE LAST DISCOURSE: ST. JOHN XIV.--XVII.

A SUPPLEMENT AND A REPLY.

IN a former article which appeared on this subject in the April number of the *Irish Church Quarterly*, the theory was proposed that the main portion of our Lord's last discourse, which according to St. John was apparently delivered on the eve of the crucifixion, belongs in reality to the teaching of the forty days. And in order to support this theory, it was suggested that St. John, when recalling remote events, might unconsciously have grouped together the sayings of both periods. This contention, however, was not intended to discredit the general trustworthiness of St. John's memory. It merely asserted a fact of universal experience, that while memory in mature life may recall the events of earlier years with the utmost accuracy (the incidents of school life, for example), yet the actual sequence of these in point of time may be lost sight of to a great extent. We are all inclined to group such recollections of events, and particularly of conversations around some prominent landmark of the past.

I also suggested in my former article that the quasi-philosophic nature of the fourth Gospel might necessitate for didactic purposes a conjunction, in part, at least, designed, of sayings originally separate in point of time. It is now almost generally allowed that St. Matthew "has chosen to prefix to his narrative of the Galilean ministry a mass of teaching, part of which, at any rate, clearly belongs to a later period of the story"; or, in the case of the sermon on the mount, "that St. Luke gives us the main outline of the sermon . . . and that St. Matthew has for a special purpose worked into it other groups of teaching, partly peculiar to him, and partly found, in quite different contexts, in St. Luke's Gospel."¹ It is not therefore unreasonable to argue

¹ J. Armitage Robinson, *The Study of the Gospels*, 1902, pp. 72, 75.

that St. John may have adopted a similar method in his Gospel, and that in part unconsciously, in part designedly, he may have conjoined in the last discourse a series of separate conversations.

Further reflexion, however, has convinced me that these introductory and purely tentative theories will not satisfactorily account for the actual transposition of our Lord's sayings during the forty days, to a period before His death. The more natural tendency of a writer who was a witness of the resurrection would be, undoubtedly, to place these sayings in their true historical position around some one or other of the recorded appearances of our Lord. Here, however, I would claim as a general principle, that while the most satisfactory proofs may be adduced as to certain effects, the causes which have produced those effects may remain problematical. The present discussion affords, I believe, a particular instance of this fact. And consequently, the main purpose of these articles is not so much to explain how this supposed displacement may have occurred, as to supply internal evidence of its existence. But that causes sufficient to account for the anachronism in question may have existed in the past, can, I think, be shown. And with this end in view, I venture to propose the following theory as supplementary to the introductory contentions of the former article; namely, that the original material of the fourth Gospel was revised by some other hand than that of the apostle, probably after his death. That this theory is meeting now with a wide acceptance must be admitted. And if it be granted here as a probable hypothesis, it will provide for two possible contingencies—(1) that some notes or manuscripts dealing with different periods of our Lord's history may have been accidentally intermingled, and (2) that the editor may have rearranged the order of the oral or written tradition in some particulars, so as to coincide with a preconceived idea or purpose of his own.

A comparison of certain passages in St. John xiii.

with others in chapters xiv.-xvii. will tend to strengthen the force of the latter supposition. The thirteenth chapter begins with the words, "Now before the feast of the passover, Jesus knowing that his hour was come that he should depart (*μεταβῆ*) out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end."¹ In the subsequent chapters we find that various words are attributed to our Lord in describing his going away. "I go (*πορεύομαι*) to prepare a place for you."² "But now I go (*ὑπάγω*) unto him that sent me."³ "It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away (*ἀπέλθω*), the Comforter will not come unto you."⁴ "And I am no more in the world . . . and I come (*ἔρχομαι*) to thee."⁵ These verbs, however they may differ in classical writings, seem to be used interchangeably in these chapters. And yet the employment of so many equivalent terms is remarkable, (1) because they avoid any direct mention of our Lord's death and ascension, and (2) because, from their very vagueness, they could be used in the same context with varying connotations. For example, the statement, "Before the feast of the passover, Jesus knowing that his hour was come, that he should depart (*μεταβῆ*) out of the world unto the Father. . . ,"⁶ may imply that the hour of death was the time of His departure. Or the writer may have regarded the "hour" as a definite period inclusive of the death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord. But, in any case, the idea of a departure at or beginning with our Lord's death is plainly evident in the passage. A similar application of the verb *ὑπάγω* may, I think, be found in the words "whither I go thou canst not follow me now. . . ."⁷ But in the words, "If ye loved me, ye would have rejoiced, because I go (*πορεύομαι*) unto the Father, for the Father is greater than I,"⁸ the idea of death is

¹ St. John xiii. 1.² xiv. 2.³ xvi. 5.⁴ xvi. 7.⁵ St. John xvii. 11.⁶ St. John viii. 1.⁷ Ibid., 36, 37.⁸ St. John xiv. 28.

apparently excluded. Otherwise, our Lord would have invited the disciples to rejoice at the prospect of his crucifixion,—a supposition which is difficult to entertain. Again, “It is expedient for you that I go away (*ἀπελθω*), for if I go not away the Comforter will not come unto you,”¹ seems to point still more plainly to the ascension as the moment of departure; inasmuch as the descent of the Holy Spirit is plainly regarded in the New Testament as a direct consequence of our Lord’s exaltation.² A like conclusion can, I think, be deduced from the seventeenth chapter, “I am no more in the world, and these are in the world, and I come (*ἐρχομαι*) to thee.”³ We find, therefore, a departure spoken of in words which may vary, and in my opinion do vary, in their range of application. In two passages at least the words *μεταβῆ* and *ὑπάγω* refer directly to our Lord’s death.⁴ In chapters xiv.-xvii. the verbs employed point to the ascension as the actual moment of His going away. Why is this? Why is there this absence of express terms as to our Lord’s death and ascension and the employment instead of words which introduce an element of ambiguity into the text?

In answer to this question, I would first of all call attention to the strange silence which the fourth Gospel maintains regarding the final departure of our Lord to heaven, and, secondly, to the extraordinary emphasis which it lays upon the scene and night of the last supper. How are we to account for this? I can only suggest, as a probable solution of the problem, that in the sub-apostolic age an impression had deepened in the minds of men, that the supreme moment of Christ’s *departure* was not so much the hour of the ascension as the eve of the crucifixion.⁵ Here, doubtless, they would say, was the true line of demarcation between the earthly and heavenly spheres of Christ’s existence. On one side was the Christ they had known according to the flesh,

¹ xvi. 7.² St. John xvii. 11.³ Acts ii. 33; Eph. iv. 8, 11.⁴ xiii. 1, 36 f.⁵ The commemorative nature of the Eucharist would, doubtless, tend to create this idea.

on the other the risen Lord whose true home was with the Father, and who had only lingered in their midst by an act of miraculous condescension. It is quite conceivable, therefore, that an editor of that time, impressed with the solemn associations of the last supper, might have incorporated from some detached manuscripts or notes the valedictory sayings of the forty days with those of the first farewell.¹

But if so, needless to say, the task would be a difficult one. The composite character of Christ's words would require some concealment. It would be necessary to harmonize, as far as it was possible, the two aspects of our Lord's departure from the world—at His death and at His ascension. And in such a case, the adoption of some general terms would be essential—terms which would be wide enough to include both of these ideas. Such terms, I contend, are employed in chapters xiii.--xvii. of the fourth Gospel. And clear statements as to Christ's death and ascension² would seem to have been avoided for a comparatively indefinite terminology.³

But here it is necessary to resume the more general consideration of the internal evidence. And in particular I would call attention to the silence which our Lord observes in this discourse as to His resurrection. It may, of course, be asserted in contradiction, that there is a reference to this event in the words, "A little while and ye behold me no more, and again a little while and ye shall see me."⁴ I have in part, however, dealt with this objection in the previous article.⁵ And a further consideration of chapter xvi. 16-32 will be found in the

¹ See St. John vi. 62, vii. 33, xiv. 28, xvi. 5. "These passages sufficiently refute the objection against the ascension on the ground that it is not mentioned by St. John."—G. F. Maclear, *An Introduction to the Creeds*, 1898, p. 167 note.

² St. John xx. 17.

³ The employment of *ὑπάγω* in St. Matthew xxvi. 24, St. Mark xiv. 21, and of *προεβόμαι* in St. Luke xxii. 22 is not open to a similar objection. The expressions are only used once, and are sufficiently explained by their contexts.

⁴ St. John xvi. 16 ff.

⁵ See *I.C.Q.* of April, 1909, where the word "editor" should be substituted for St. John.

subsequent argument. But, if we look elsewhere throughout chapters xiv.-xvii., we search in vain for any statement as to our Lord's rising from the grave. On the contrary, the one truth which Christ reiterates and emphasizes in the discourse is His "departure": "In my Father's house are many mansions . . . I go to prepare a place for you."¹ He assures them that His going away will not deprive them of His support: "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto the Father."² "He shall give you another Comforter that he may be with you for ever. . . I will not leave you desolate; I come to you."³ As they viewed the prospect of His going away with sorrow, He reassures them with the words, "If ye loved me, ye would have rejoiced, because I go unto the Father: for the Father is greater than I."⁴ And finally, in the prayer of intercession He cries, as if at that very moment He were on the point of passing from their sight, "I am no more in the world, and these are in the world, and I come to thee."⁵ It is strange. Why, in this discourse which appeals to motives that should rouse men's faith to a very height of ecstasy, which explains the purpose of His departure, which assures them of His spiritual presence, which speaks of their union with the Father and Himself, which bids them pray unto the Father in His name, and which foretells His future work of intercession, why is the one stupendous truth unmentioned upon which this whole edifice of doctrine depends? Why is the main link wanting in this chain? There seems to me to be only one answer, namely, that if He were the risen Lord, it was not necessary, after He had given them visible proof of His identity, to assure them of His resurrection. In that case, He was not called upon to enforce a self-evident proposition, but rather to emphasize the truth which He

¹ St. John xiv. 2.² *Ibid.*, 12.³ *Ibid.*, 16, 18.⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.⁵ xvii. 11.

first declared to Mary Magdalene, "Go unto my brethren and say to them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God."¹

But further, an important question arises here as to the effect which this discourse actually had upon the minds of the disciples. Of one fact at least we can be assured, that whatever was the nature of our Lord's teaching during the forty days, the disciples learned from His instruction to regard His ascension as the happiest of events. "They worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: and were continually in the temple blessing God."² Almost everything in the last discourse would tend to create these feelings of joy and devotion. "Let not your heart be troubled. . . . I go to prepare a place for you."³ "If ye loved me, ye would have rejoiced, because I go unto the Father."⁴ "It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you."⁵ But, if these words according to the fourth Gospel were uttered on the night of the betrayal, we are confronted with the astounding fact, that this invitation to joy and hope was followed by the blankest misery and despair. Is it possible that this could have been the result? If so, their desertion of Christ stamps the cowardice of the disciples with a stigma that has no parallel in history. In hours of extremity like this, other leaders, however unworthy, who have addressed their followers in tones of assurance, and who have appealed to their trust and affection with promises of ultimate success, have inspired the loftiest courage and devotion. In such moments the sense of danger has only served to fan the flame of enthusiasm. Though it is not necessary to minimize the weakness of these men, yet, at least, they may be spared this unexampled reproach. If this call to faith and allegiance was not addressed to them on the night in question, then their

¹ xx. 17.

² St. Luke xxiv. 52, 53.

³ St. John xiv. 1 f.

⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵ xvi. 7.

subsequent conduct, though weak in the extreme, admits of explanation. If He did not speak of peace when "he was troubled in spirit," if in the agony of conflict His voice was silent as to future victory, or, instead of striving to support the drooping courage of His followers, He rather threw Himself in deep dejection upon their sympathy, then it is possible to understand how their confidence in His power was weakened, and why terror and helplessness possessed their souls. No other supposition will explain the utter unpreparedness of the disciples for the tidings of the resurrection. But on the other hand, if the "last discourse" was addressed by our Lord to the disciples during the forty days, then the relationship between cause and effect can be recognized at once, and the joy which His followers exhibited, and their attitude of faith and worship, are the natural outcome of this teaching. It may doubtless be said in objection, that this argument is invalidated by chapter xvi. 28-32. Here our Lord is represented as saying, "I came out from the Father, and am come into the world: again I leave the world and go unto the Father. His disciples say, Lo, now speakest thou plainly . . . by this we believe that thou camest forth from God. Jesus answered them, Do ye now believe? Behold the hour cometh, yea, is come, that ye shall be scattered every man to his own, and shall leave me alone." But to this objection I would reply, that in chapter xvi. 16-32 the sayings of both periods seem to me to be more closely incorporated than elsewhere, as if the writer, or, as I should rather say, the editor, was striving to harmonize two related yet *separate* trains of thought. The disciples' profession of belief was admittedly spoken on the night in question. But it bears the appearance from its very nature of being a response to some brief statement of our Lord at the supper table, as to His origin and destiny, and one that was not originally spoken in connexion with the preceding discourse. For, if it had been so, why should their confession of faith have been narrowed down to the acceptance of this

single revelation? There are other truths in these chapters which seem to bear more plainly and directly on their personal interests and welfare. Why should their assent have been withheld from these? Or, why should they delay their acceptance of this particular truth so long, when our Lord had repeatedly insisted upon the same teaching in the preceding portion of his address?¹

By the consideration of these difficulties I am forced to conclude that the main portion of the discourse in chapters xiv.-xvii. was not delivered by our Lord on the eve of His death. And if some rare expressions of hopefulness passed from His lips in those hours of suffering, their effect upon the disciples was only transient; doubtless because they needed some further and fuller revelation of the continued existence and authority of our Lord beyond this world, which meets us in these very chapters. But failing this, we may understand, I think, how their sudden outburst of enthusiasm would subside as quickly as it arose, when faced by the disheartening spectacle of His passion.

But further, a comparison between St. John xvii. and the words and bearing of Christ at the scene of the ascension, as recorded by St. Matthew and St. Luke, conveys a very distinct idea of resemblance. And although it is necessary to speak here with hesitation, yet that resemblance suggests the probability that the prayer of intercession may have been the last utterance of our Lord on earth. "These things spake Jesus, and lifting up his eyes to heaven, he said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee: *even as thou gavest him authority over all flesh*, that whatsoever thou hast given him, to them he should give eternal life. And this is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God and him whom thou didst send, *even Jesus Christ.*"² The similarity of this in tone and thought to St. Matthew's narrative is sufficient to arrest attention: "The eleven disciples went into Galilee... And Jesus came to them, saying, *all authority hath been*

¹ xiv. 2, 12; xvi. 5.

² St. John xvii. 1 ff.

given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . ."¹ Reverting again to St. John xvii., the command to preach the gospel, as given by St. Matthew, finds an equivalent line of thought in the words, "As thou didst send me into the world, even so sent I them into the world. . . . Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word."² The interest deepens when we turn to the narrative of St. Luke, "And he led them out until they were over against Bethany, and he lifted up his hands and blessed them."³ "And he said unto them . . . Ye shall receive power when the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem . . . and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. And when he had said these things, as they were looking, he was taken up and a cloud received him out of their sight."⁴ Again, in St. John xvii. the whole tenor of the Saviour's words is suggestive of farewell and benediction. "Father, that which thou hast given me, I will that, where I am, they also may be with me; that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world."⁵ A careful comparison of these and similar passages in chapter xvii. with St. Matthew and St. Luke in their accounts of the ascension leads to the indisputable conclusion, that, as according to the Synoptists the parting words of Christ comprised a missionary discourse and a blessing, even so a similar sequence of ideas may be traced in the prayer of intercession.

It may be said that the endeavour to maintain a theory like this is attended with a certain danger, that it calls in question the present sacred position of those solemn words, so long identified with the hours of the Saviour's passion, and that therefore it is necessary to pause lest an element of controversy should obtrude

¹ St. Matt. xxviii. 17 ff.

³ St. Luke xxiv. 50, 51.

² St. John xvii. 18, 20.

⁴ Acts i. 7 ff.

⁵ St. John xvii. 24 ff.; see also verses 11, 15, 17.

itself on such holy ground. And yet assuredly, it may be replied, that the main contention of these articles is one which involves no doctrinal issue; nor can it detract in any way from the sublime principles of faith, of hope, and love which meet us in these words of Christ. On the contrary, it may be said, that if anything could add a deeper interest and solemnity to these chapters it would be the conviction that they contain, in a still truer sense than is generally received, "the last discourse," or that in this sublime prayer we may hear the very words of final blessing which our Lord pronounced upon His followers to the end of time, when He was taken from them and a cloud received Him from their sight.

It is necessary, before concluding, to reply to some points which have been raised in objection by Mr. McConnell, in the July number of this journal.

1. The insufficiency of my original theories to account for the displacement in question, I have already dealt with in the preceding argument.

2. The argument which I based on the silence of the Synoptists is not, I think, affected by the mere statement of a second difficulty, viz., the silence of St. John regarding the institution of the Lord's supper.¹ Mr. McConnell has ignored in his criticism here the special circumstances and considerations enumerated in my previous article, which make the silence of the Synoptists an important asset in this discussion.

3. "Arise, let us go hence." The traditional and mutually contradictory explanations which deny the plain inference derivable from these words are unsatisfactory in the extreme. If we conclude, that there was no departure from the house, we nullify the command of Christ. If the possibility of an adjournment to the courtyard or temple is entertained, we are in conflict with the statements of the Synoptists. They speak of

¹ St. John xiv. 31. See A. Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1901, vol. ii., p. 510, note.

only one departure for the purpose of proceeding to the Mount of Olives (καὶ ἐξελθὼν ἐπορεύθη κατὰ τὸ ἔθος εἰς τὸ ὄρος τῶν ἐλαιῶν.)¹

4. Psychological arguments may or may not be based on a foundation of reality. In this case, few will deny the intensity of our Lord's emotion: "He was possessed with fear, horror, and amazement, encompassed with grief and overwhelmed with sorrow, pressed down with consternation and dejection of mind, tormented with anxiety."² I can only contend once more that the glad and confident tone of Christ's words in chapters xiv.-xvii. are inconsistent with the fact, that before He left the room His passion had begun.³ I cannot see how this detracts in any way from the all-surpassing courage of our Lord. Fortitude and resolution would seem to be exemplified most of all in times of depression, when only a supreme effort of will enables the sufferer to persevere.

5. "Father, the hour is come, glorify thy Son."⁴ I cannot admit that this "hour" must *always* be identified, as it usually is, with the approaching sacrifice of our Lord. The "hour" here seems to synchronize with the glorification, and if this latter was a progressive experience⁵ beginning with the cross of Christ and consummated in His exaltation, then the "hour" can represent a period inclusive of the death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord. Assuredly, the scene of the ascension would have been a most appropriate moment for such a prayer.

I close this paper with the following quotation from a sermon by the late Canon Liddon. It shows, I think, that the theory I have been advocating had loomed before his mind, although he does not go so far as

¹ St. Luke xxii. 39.

² Pearson, *On the Creed*.

³ St. John xiii. 21.

⁴ St. John xvii. 1.

⁵ B. F. Westcott, *The Historic Faith: Short Lectures on the Apostles' Creed*, 1893.

actually to maintain it. In alluding to the Gospels for some of the Sundays after Easter, he says:—

“Historically speaking, these Gospels seem to be, at first sight, out of place; in reading them we go back from Eastertide to a time from which we are separated by the crucifixion and the resurrection. But looking to the contents of these Gospels, they are, we must see, strictly appropriate. They are one and all preparations for a great departure, and for that which will follow it. They might have been spoken so far as the contents go—I am, of course, saying nothing of their immediate purpose—they might have been spoken, at least in the main, during the great forty days, just as well as on the eve of the passion.”¹

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¹ H. P. Liddon, *Easter in St. Paul's*, 1892, p. 422.