

THE PLACE OF THE RESURRECTION IN HISTORY.

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The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a unique event in the world's history, but not an isolated one. In the broad field of the world's developments it stands forth as strikingly as the highest peak of a great mountain system; to those inner forces which produced these developments it stands related as the hub to the spokes of a wheel, as the life to the plant that springs from the earth. Whoever has read thoughtfully the statements of the New Testament as to the relation of our Lord's resurrection to the individual Christian life will be in part prepared for such a statement, for that which occupies so vital a place in individual lives cannot be regarded as separate from the great world-life and powerless with respect to it. But the relation of the resurrection to the history of the world at large is so notable and important that one wonders attention is not more frequently called to it.

True history is likely to be false history unless the thought-life of the period under consideration be rightly understood. Human action grows out of human thought. The political events of any age are always of less importance than the thought-currents of that age. Those things which touch and fashion the thought-life of the world, therefore, are the things of highest importance in the world's history. It is doubtless entirely safe to say that no other event has ever influenced and modified the thought of the world as the resurrection of our Lord.

I. IT COMPLETED ISRAEL'S HOPE.

Jehovah selected Israel to be His own people in a peculiar sense. Consequently the Hebrews constituted a microcosm

within the macrocosm of the world's thought-life. To them were given, from time to time, rich revelations of truth. Kept isolated, as they were, from the life of the world about them, their plan of thinking was lifted morally far above that of the surrounding peoples.

But they were not able always to grasp and unify the revelations given them. Especially was this true with respect to the promised deliverer for whom they looked. That "seed of the woman" which was to "bruise the serpent's head" was presented from many points of view before the stream of prophecy had ceased to flow, and the Old Testament canon had been closed. He was to be a great Prophet,¹ a great Priest,² a great King,³ a great Sufferer,⁴ a Son of man,⁵ Himself God.⁶ As Liddon has observed,⁷ it ought not to surprise us that the people of Israel found difficulty in harmonizing these seemingly contradictory conceptions of the Coming One. And evidently the presentations of the future deliverer which caused them the most trouble were those which conceived Him as a great sufferer and Himself God. A great prophet might be at the same time a great priest, and a great prophet-priest might at the same time be a great king; but how could one who embraced in Himself all these characteristics be at the same time a great sufferer and Himself God?

The conceptions were so entirely incompatible that they were never combined in the thought of the Hebrew people. Gradually the Coming One came to be thought of more and more as a mighty ruler, and the other phases of his character were largely lost from view, ignored, or assigned to another. So far had this process gone by the time our Lord came, that, "If at the outset of His ministry He had openly declared His Messiahship, He would have aroused vain hopes, probably have precipitated a revolution, and brought Himself in conflict with Roman authority".⁸ He was obliged to remain *incognito* until

(1) Deut. 18:18, 19. (2) Zech. 6:13. (3) Ps. 2:45. (4) Isa. 53.

(5) Dan. 7:13. (6) Isa. 9:6.

(7) "The Divinity of our Lord", P. 88.

(8) Milton G. Evans, President of Crozer Theological Seminary, *New Testament Theology* (printed for class-room use), p. 47.

He had in some measure changed the conceptions of His followers.

But even the richness of His life and teaching did not suffice to clarify His disciples' thought. The utter despondency into which His death threw them shows conclusively that, privileged though they had been, they were not yet able to blend the various Old Testament conceptions of Him into one. That He could die, and still be the great ruler of whom the prophets had written, continued to be beyond their power to comprehend. They had accepted Him as the Son of God, but they could not believe that the anointed Son of God could die.

The resurrection, however, made the impossible possible. As iron-filings scattered on a glass come into order and unity at the touch of a magnet, so the various conceptions of the Messiah which had lain uncombined in Hebrew thought were by the mighty power of Christ's resurrection merged into one. In the light of His triumph over the tomb it could be seen that His sufferings were but the pathway to His Kingship; that the incomparable "Man of sorrows" had most fittingly become the "King of kings". All lack of harmony disappeared. The contradictory became the complementary. Jesus of Nazareth stood forth as the perfect embodiment of all that had been foretold of Israel's Coming One. The hope of Israel, which had continued more or less vague and incomplete during the centuries, became definite and complete and world-conquering in its reach.

II. IT ILLUMINATED THE GENTILE DARKNESS.

Man's failure to read the future has been most pathetic. In the earliest history of the great peoples of antiquity belief in a future life appears firmly entrenched. During centuries and millenniums, both before and after Christ, God kept His chosen people largely isolated from the world-life about them. The nations were left to themselves to demonstrate whether by seeking in their own way they might find out God. At least some

of them lived under natural conditions as favorable to development as the world knows. Great civilizations sprang up, some of which continue until today. Great cities were built, great legal systems wrought out, great literatures written. Some of the master minds of history grappled, as such minds always do, with the fundamental soul-problems of the race.

But the outcome was darkness rather than light in every case. The conviction that at death man did not cease to be, led to inquiry as to the nature of that future life. Satisfactory reply was found impossible. A sufficient basis for the conviction itself was sought and none could be discovered. Consequently as the centuries passed the conviction became less strong. Space will not permit the setting forth in detail of the evidence for these general statements, but the movement of thought concerning man's future in the Graeco-Roman world prior to Christ and in India down to recent times will be sketched briefly as illustrative of the universal tendency.

The early literature of India makes it clear that from ten to fifteen centuries before Christ the people of that land believed in a future existence, though some uncertainty remains as to whether that existence was thought of as endless. By doing the things he ought, man might pass into "that everlasting and imperishable world where there is eternal light and glory".⁹ In its earliest form this belief in a future existence "is a cheerful and hopeful belief, expressive of a joy in life and a desire for life. There is no hint of the wish to be rid of the burden of existence; no suggestion of the previous life of the soul, or of the rebirth of the soul in the body of man or beast. The Vedic hymns have nothing today of transmigration, or any dread cycle of births and deaths."¹⁰ Later, from some unknown source, the doctrine of transmigration came into Indian thought, and the cheerfulness and hopefulness of the earlier views of the future life were gradually supplanted by heaviness and despair. And now for centuries the best the

(9) Rig Veda.

(10) Quotations in this and following paragraph are taken from Salmond's "The Christian Doctrine of Immortality", except where otherwise noted.

future has held for the ordinary man has been only a continuous succession of births and deaths, each succeeding interval of life but little better or worse than the preceding. For the fully enlightened there is something somewhat better. These may enter into "the eternal rest of Nirvana". But that "eternal rest", whatever else may be said about it, certainly means "at least the cessation of personal life, the end of the weary way of individuality. . . . the absorption of the individual soul in the Universal Soul".

In early Greek thought death was regarded as the worst of evils, stronger than the gods themselves. Something survived death, but not the full, real man. The future was dark and gloomy because of the poverty of existence. Man's future was to be spent in the "house of Hades", a place "desolate of joy". The plains were barren; the rivers were rivers of hate, sorrow, lamentation, fire; the trees were fruitless poplars; the sun never pierced the gloom and everlasting night reigned supreme. It was a place of horror to even the gods themselves. The dead were thought to have hereafter "all they had on earth, but in reduced, deceptive form". This "reduced, deceptive form" of things about him, joined with the failure of the full man himself to survive death, caused his future existence to be "so emptied of the strength and fulness of life that nothing could dispel its gloom, no honor or consideration within its dark domain could make it tolerable". In later Grecian thought the conception of the future became somewhat changed. The Eleusinian mysteries gave "the hope of a better immortality" by spectacular ceremonial teaching. The Orphic mysteries introduced a moralizing element. Pindar deepened this moral element, and pictured the future of the good as brighter still. Plato brought the doctrine of the future to its highest development in Greek thought. Indeed, it is hardly too much to say of his discussion, that it is "intrinsically the greatest contribution drawn from philosophical speculation upon the question. . . . the noblest single offering the human reason has yet made upon the

altar of human hope".¹¹ But even this, which doubtless marks the limit of the human mind in that direction, "did not rise to a permanent contribution to man's faith and hope. It failed to take hold of the common mind. It did not even address itself to the masses of the people". Plato's "arguments did not convince". It remained for Aristotle, for a time a pupil of Plato and later his successful rival, to formulate those views of the future which finally prevailed in the Graeco-Roman world. He sternly followed "the guidance of his logic to its last conclusions".¹² In a formal treatise "On the Soul" he formally examined its various elements and their mutual relations. The soul, according to his teaching, is the energy or function of an organized body. Two elements are found in it, the passive and the active. Of these the first is perishable, and only the latter is immortal. But this active element of the soul does not form any part of a man in reality—"it comes from without, and is not bound to the *me* by any organic ties."¹³ Just what Aristotle means by this active element of the soul is very hard to understand, but there can be no question as to his conclusion. "By affirming that the eternal (active) intelligence alone was immortal, he positively denies individual immortality. On this point of the Peripatetic teaching there cannot be the slightest dispute."¹⁴

These teachings of the great logician fell into congenial soil. More and more they spread abroad until the Christ came. And with their spread there settled down upon those Mediterranean lands such darkness as only the Sun of Righteousness could penetrate, such despair as only the Desire of all nations could relieve by hope. In the words of Dr. Breed: "The heart of the Roman world was consumed with desire which could not be gratified; shaken with the agitation of a soul no longer master of itself. The hope of annihilation was the only consolation which it enjoyed, and in this heartless, sickening, stifling, overwhelming despair the representative of the Graeco-Roman

(11) Geddis, "The Phaedo of Plato".

(12) Westcott, "The Gospel of the Resurrection", p. 148.

(13) Weber, "History of Philosophy", p. 129.

(14) Id. p. 130.

world abandoned himself to anything that might afford him some relief."¹⁵

"On that hard pagan world disgust
And secret loathing fell;
Deep weariness and sated lust
Made human life a hell."¹⁶

So everywhere the human mind has failed to reach the light with respect to the future. And if the conviction that there is a future life determined by the life that now is, be torn from the human breast, what will be the nature of the present life? If answer needs to be made, let history speak again—the history of our Lord's day and of our day. Darkness in the midst of the light, yea, darkness that swallows up the light and becomes darker still. It was earth's moral midnight without moon or star that was shot through by the sunlight of Christ's resurrection. With His rising the vanishing and vanquished conviction that a man should live hereafter came back to dwell eternally with men, and to become more and more the greater artificer of life. A happier morn this world has never seen than when our Lord stepped forth from death to life, and bade the light go forth through all earth's dismal night.

III. IT RECONCILED THE WORLD'S THOUGHT.

We have already seen that the truth given to Israel remained in a chaotic state until Christ had risen. And just as in the Hebrew world truth was seen in segments and in no wise grasped as a whole, so also was it in the great Gentile world.

There is discernible in each one of the well-known ancient religions a considerable portion of truth, but no one of them, apart from Judaism, even approximated that symmetry of truth necessary to the religion that would become universal. Brahmanism has a deep sense of the spiritual, of the infinite, of

(15) "Preparation of the World for Christ", p. 399.

(16) Matthew Arnold's Poems, "Oberman Once More".

the eternal; but it falls far short of any adequate conception of matter, of the finite and of time. Buddhism was a revolt from Brahmanism, according to Clarke, and emphasized those truths ignored by Brahmanism. Consequently in Buddhism thought centers about matter, not spirit, about the finite and not the infinite. Confucianism exalted the family and made it the basis of the state, but in some respects it can hardly with propriety be called a religion at all.¹⁷ Zoroastrianism conceived the world as the great battle ground between the good and the evil. Freedom and right and wrong were made prominent, but there was no unity. All was confusion and perpetual conflict. Egypt stressed the life forces of nature. Her gods were "powers and laws", too mysterious and far-removed from men to be really worshipped. Greece saw only men. "Everything in the Greek Pantheon is human".¹⁸ Consequently the gods were too near the people to receive any real reverence.

Moreover, in addition to this entire failure on the part of each and all of these religions of antiquity to approach that full development of truth which alone can make a religion universal, it is evident that the various truths embodied in them were apparently antagonistic. Not only was the positive truth of Buddhism opposed to that of Brahmanism, but a similar antagonism existed between Confucianism and Zoroastrianism, and between the religion of Greece and that of Egypt. If there was needed in the Hebrew world something to unify and complete Israel's conception of the truth, how much greater was that need in the Gentile world.

And now, bearing all these facts in mind, a still broader view of the world's thought must be undertaken. Westcott, including all religious apart from the Hebrew under the term Paganism, has pointed out three great lines of difference be-

(17) Confucianism presents itself to the inquirer partly as a system of political and social ethics and partly as a state religion, embodying the worship of nature, of the spirits of departed worthies, and of ancestors. From one point of view it is, therefore, a religion, while from another it is not.—Arthur H. Smith, "The Uplift of China", p. 88.

(18) James Freeman Clarke, "Ten Great Religions", Part I. p. 24.

tween Paganism and Judaism:¹⁹ (1) The point of view from which man was considered. Paganism contemplated man in himself, Judaism viewed him as the creature of Jehovah. (2) The source of authority. In Paganism the appeal was made to "a common conscience, or to the necessary laws of thought, or to history". In Judaism the appeal was to "the word of the Lord". That is, in the former men obeyed because they recognized the command as essentially just, or were obliged to submit to a stronger force; in the latter "the statutes of right" were "not primarily based on intuitions or suggested by experience, but embodied in a law" which must be respected not because it was inherently right, but because it came from Jehovah. (3) The principle of life. The life spring of Paganism was human freedom. Man was a law unto himself, fashioning his own restraints and rearing his own structure of knowledge. The life principle of Judaism was divine sovereignty. God spake, and his revelation must be accepted and his commands obeyed. Man was not master of himself but the servant of the Most High.

Evidently this last difference is the fundamental one. And with this basal difference between Paganism and Judaism, and the incompleteness and lack of unity evident in all religions whether Pagan or Hebrew, fully in mind, how clearly and marvelously does the resurrection of Christ stand forth as the one event in time capable of reconciling the world's thought. By unifying the Old Testament revelations and completing Israel's hope, the resurrection gave to the world at large a religion fitted to become universal. At the same time that it gathered the seemingly discordant truths revealed to Israel into one beautiful whole, it gathered into one also all the truths emphasized by the various religions of the Gentile world, and joined them inseparably with the "truth of God" as given to Israel. And in this great revelation of the unity of truth, it also became apparent that the fundamental age-long difference between Paganism and Judaism had also disappeared. The risen Christ was crowned with all authority in heaven and in earth, and

(19) "The Gospel of the Resurrection", p. 209.

such exaltation of humanity not only embraced but passed far beyond the Gentile world's emphasis of man's freedom and dignity. But the Christ thus crowned had previously rendered an obedience to the law of God so perfect that not one jot or title was lost from Judiasm's claim that Jehovah was the supreme ruler of all that is. In the light of the resurrection both man and God appeared in their true place and proper relationship, and the religious thought of the world was reconciled and unified.

IV. IT BECAME THE FOUNTAIN OF AFTER HISTORY.

If what has above been claimed for the resurrection of our Lord be at all true, then Christ's triumph over the tomb must of necessity have become an important center in the world's history. And only a brief consideration of Christianity's progress during the centuries, and of its present influence in the world, is needed to show that the resurrection was indeed the very fountain whence has flowed the mightiest stream in the history of the planet.

Christianity was dropped into the world like grains of mustard seed into the earth. Its growth may seem to have been slow, but it has grown. At the close of the first century the number of Christians in the world was about 500,000. Three centuries later the number had increased to 10,000,000. The close of the eighth century found 30,000,000 professing loyalty to the risen Lord, and the end of the first one thousand years 50,000,000. In another five hundred years this number had doubled. Since the beginning of the sixteenth century the growth has been far more rapid, and today there are probably at least 530,000,000 people in the world who gladly bear the name of Christ. That is, today one out of every three persons in the world is a Christian.

The influence in the world at large of this constantly growing body of Christians has been and now is far greater, however, than is to be gathered from any process of "counting noses". There inheres in the teachings of Christ a matchless

power to uplift. Wherever goes faith in Him as Savior and obedience to Him as Lord, there goes at the same time marked progress and development. Spiritual enlightenment increases intellectual vigor. As thought is clarified with respect to the spiritual, it becomes clearer also concerning the material. Individual pre-eminence leads inevitably to national pre-eminence. More vigorous and clearer thinking by individuals lifts the multitudes to a higher grade of civilization, and higher civilization brings increased world-influence. And so it has come to pass that today the nations most eminently Christian are the nations most eminently influential in the world's affairs.

Also this same spiritual life principle which has given the Christian nations pre-eminence as world powers by virtue of the higher type of civilization it has developed within them, has, within the last one hundred and fifty years, begun to work among almost all the nations of the earth. The church has been reaching out in an endeavor to bring all men unto Christ. The secret of the progress of the great Christian nations is being made evident to the various peoples of the earth in their own homes. Godly men and women are daily living before them lives that testify in unmistakable ways to the mighty power of Christ to save and to keep and to uplift. The lives of the missionaries are making their message understood and its power felt. Under the most unfavorable conditions the world affords, the gospel is demonstrating itself to be "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."

The combined effect of the prestige of Christian nations and the work of the missionaries has been prodigious. Besides the thousands in Asia, Africa and the islands of the sea who have heartily accepted the truth as it is in Jesus, there are tens of thousands in whose souls the conviction has become inseparably rooted that the ways of their fathers were not altogether right. A world-wide dissatisfaction is arising, a Gospel-produced restlessness. The people of the whole earth are beginning to make inventory of their stock religiously, and are finding themselves much poorer than they thought. In sheer compulsion they are lifting their eyes to Christianity as the greatest of friends or foes. It cannot yet be safely said, perhaps, that the world rec-

ognizes the religion of the cross as God's greatest gift to men, but it can with entire safety be asserted that the world has already recognized Christianity as the mightiest force discernible in all the events of time. And he who rejoices in the cross, thus already "towering o'er the wrecks of time", doubts not that its exaltation will continue increasingly until the One who was lifted up upon it has indeed drawn all men unto Himself.

But would Christianity ever have been if Christ had not risen from the dead? Of course, the resurrection is not all of Christianity. Christ is Christianity, but not any one thing that Christ did. On the other hand, some things that Christ did are essential parts of Him, if one may so speak. Where would the Christ of the New Testament and of the church of the ages be apart from His death? or apart from His resurrection? Whoever accepts the New Testament teaching must regard the resurrection as vitally related at many points to the individual Christian life. And if it is vital to the individual Christian life, it is, of course, equally so to the life of the church in its broadest sense. Christianity, at least such as we have it today—and it is of the Christianity of today we are speaking—never could have been if the resurrection had not occurred.

But there is still another reason, and perhaps, a better one, for characterizing the resurrection of our Lord as the fountain of after history. It is not only essential to Christian life, but it has in reality more than any other one thing in the Christian system been the source and stay of the church's activity. Without it the church would have been still-born. At Christ's death hope forsook utterly the hearts of His followers, and its return was impossible save through the empty grave. With His resurrection, hope, with clearer vision and greater strength than were ever hers before, came back to their hearts to abide forever. It was the "power of his resurrection" that established the church. It is the "power of his resurrection" that has given Christianity to the world. It is far more than a fanciful figure of speech to say that the resurrection of our Lord was the very fountain whence has come the world's history until now. It is to state a great truth the proof of which is becoming more manifest with every passing year.