

# Once in Khartoum

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*'Inter urinas et faeces nascimur omnes'*

There are concatenations of events that prompt reflexion: such as a television programme on the evidence for Jesus; a hand-out in criticism thereof, composed at Cardinal Hume's request by some biblical and theological scholars; public expressions of disbelief, some episcopal, preceding the consecration of the new Bishop of Durham; the fulmination of York Minster, if you like; and, again if you like, the remarkable scarcity of public expressions, whether of belief or disbelief, from our own hierarchy. *New Blackfriars*, where in past years articles have appeared expressing a variety of views upon biblical veracity, seems a suitable place for some prompted reflexions. All references are to the bibliography.

There is one reflexion I get out of the way before offering my own—I found it in the *Universe* for June 29 of last year. There it was said that one proper reaction of Catholics to the dissent exhibited in the Church of England is a 'a sense of humble gratitude for the guidance we have in the Church for our Faith, as well as a deepening fidelity' (Burridge, col. 4). Whatever else the disagreements in *New Blackfriars* have done, they at least forbid us to lay to our souls any such flattering unction as that nonsense. There is in the Roman Church much dissent in these matters, dissent that goes very deep and shews no sign of going away. Some years ago, two writers in this journal expressed the dissent with force and clarity, and it is from what they wrote that I begin the reflexions I have to offer.

For Michael Dummett, whose *New Blackfriars* article was very recently reprinted in *Communio*, in German, the current appeal by exegetes to the literary forms of scriptural writing is consciously or unconsciously dishonest, and little more than a device for concealing what is really meant. One example he offers concerns attributions of authorship. If we have (and as Christians we should have) a prior commitment to the truthfulness of the biblical writers, we cannot allow that the Second Epistle of Peter is not, as it claims to be, by the apostle, or that an evangelist has put into the mouth of Our Lord (e.g. in Mark iv 10f.) an interpretation of a parable that is in fact of later devising. And the reason Dummett offers goes to the heart of what disturbs him in modern exegesis: pseudonymous attribution in cases like these is more than poetic licence, it aims at impressing readers by

inducing in them a belief that is false (pp. 57, 58). When exegetes appeal to the literary form of a passage in Scripture, they are simply making a gratuitous hypothesis that such a deceptive form could exist. They pay lip-service to the veracity of biblical writers, while denying the truth of what the text of the writers makes them claim (pp. 58, 59).

For Fergus Kerr, these problems of exegesis cannot be so summarily dismissed. Pseudonymous writing is prominent in the tradition that was inherited by writers of the New Testament (p. 108–109). Their midrashic procedures—developments and searching of Scripture, cast in imaginative and narrative form—may be startling to us, they were familiar to those among whom Christianity first grew up (pp. 110–111). The freedom with which the evangelists treated their material touches things as sacred as the last words of Jesus and the Easter stories. Different and incompatible accounts of them exist, and bear witness to the freedom (pp. 111–113).

My first reflexion puts me apart from both Dummett and Kerr, because they agree in couching their disagreement from the start in *ethical* terms, and so make it a question as to whether the evangelists were deceivers. Instead, I start by asking *what sort of writing it is that we have been left*, and I go for a piece of terminology to the famous limerick that tells of the two ill-matched persons who once met in Khartoum, and that, as readers will recall, ends with the classic question ‘Who does what, and with which, and to whom?’ I give the name ‘Khartoum-propositions’ to the kind of statement that answers questions of that sort—statements concerned with simple actions and conditions of persons and things. There is obviously no sharp boundary to this class of statement, but fair samples of it are part of the material on which the historian works, and they do set limits on what he can fairly claim. I have introduced the term for an embarrassing reason. The New Testament contains many Khartoum-propositions and many more are implied by its contents; and yet such propositions are just what the New Testament writers, and the tradition in which they wrote, are not all that much to be trusted with. This, my first reflexion, I go on to spell out.

Kerr ought to have added that there is more to concern us in the Bible than pseudonymity. Consider the Book of Daniel, which provided so much imagery for the first Christians. It is now regarded by exegetes as pseudonymous, as composed during Maccabean times to give encouragement to those resisting persecution, and doing so by narrating interventions of divine power in favour of the just. But, just as the book is now judged to be pseudonymous, so are the narratives in it judged to be fictitious: the fiery furnace, the lions’ den, the writing on the wall—*c’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas la vérité*. I am not concerned here to pass a professional judgment upon the exegesis that leads us to withdraw belief from such writings, or from the New

Testament writings in the same tradition—indeed I have no such professional competence. I am concerned simply with a *consequentia*, with an *implication*: I am trying to state as clearly as I can what I think to be entailed by the exegesis commonly exercised upon biblical writings. For me, Kerr's example of contradictions in the accounts of the last words of Jesus is only one instance among many, for the evangelists wrote in a tradition that does not allow us to argue from the *form* of a Khartoum-proposition to its *truth*. They often leave an indeterminacy concerning the times and places and deeds and words of those whose times and places and deeds and words appear in their text. We may well be able to reach some determinacy here. If we do, it will not be simply a matter of accepting an assertion because it is in Scripture; and, time and again, we shall to remain uncertain.

I develop this first reflexion, on what the New Testament writings are like, with my second—*on what should be our own attitude to them*. For me, the expression 'literary form' is unfortunate because it gives the impression that there is a whole range of forms, antecedently given, among which a piece of Scripture can be allotted its appropriate place. Now there are indeed such 'job-descriptions' of styles of writing, and we do indeed fail to do justice to the ancient world if we forget that styles then were more rigidly demarcated than now (Fraenkel's *Horace* offers a wealth of examples). But we must be clear that talk of 'literary form' is on many occasions evaluative rather than descriptive. Exegetes did not use their skill to transfer the opening chapters of Genesis from one literary form to another; it was growth in secular knowledge that obliged them to abandon beliefs they had once held about the stories. How we should now describe the stories is a fair question, but no description of them can fairly elude our abandonment of belief. In other words, when we describe the stories in terms of literary forms, we sometimes express our changed attitude towards their truth. And such an expression of disbelief is, I think, common enough in what is said of the early part of Genesis.

Less common is the admission that such a withdrawal of belief is implied by modern exegesis of the New Testament. But we do not have to look far in its claims there to find Khartoum-propositions once held to be true and now held to be at best doubtful, whatever terminology may be used to describe their literary purpose. Understandably, it is miraculous narratives that have chiefly lost credit, but I shall begin instead with a text that shews what a New Testament writer made of notions like proof and evidence. I have in mind the discourse which the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles presents as the very first public proclamation of the Gospel—Peter's discourse on the first Whit Sunday. Jesus, he says, was crucified, but God has raised him up, for death could not hold him; as David wrote in the Psalms, 'neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption'. Now

David is dead, and his tomb is well known; but, being a prophet, he wrote the words concerning the resurrection of Christ.

Where can comment made by us today even begin on a text like that? It is not so much the mistakes that disconcert—the Psalm is not by David, and has nothing to do with anybody's resurrection—as the fact that the text is put forward as an *argument*, an argument that, relying on what to us is fanciful exegesis, has as its climax a pointing out of the tomb of David, long dead, while lacking any word, much less any investigation, concerning the tomb of Christ, alleged to have recently risen. Modern exegesis, of course, tells us that the passage does not represent Peter himself, but rather Christian preaching in Luke's circle about the eighties and nineties (or so Turner says in his interesting article, and I take his word for it). So we have pseudonymity once more, but—once more—pseudonymity is not what is most disconcerting. To be sure, we can say that the passage is a homily, or whatever else we like, and that the early Christians found it convincing. What worries me is that, if such was their idea of conviction, what respect do they deserve from us?

Consider the distinction drawn between the later 'empty tomb stories' in the Gospels and the earlier preaching of the resurrection in the Acts and Epistles. I should have thought what mattered most was that a passage like that in Acts ii shews no concern for the tomb of Jesus at all in the argument it offers, and that Paul does not either, in narrating the appearances. If ever there was a claim that needed checking, surely it was that one had risen from the dead—not, of course, in the sense that the content of Christian belief in the Resurrection could be checked by a test, but in the humbler but necessary 'Khartoum' sense: that details about the emptiness could and ought to have been got clear from the start. For better or worse, the New Testament is not like that, and so we must treat it accordingly. There is indeed more to life than arguments and checking, but they do form part of life, and they make our conclusion unavoidable: such weakness in biblical texts demands that we exercise caution when presented with reports made in those texts.

As this caution is commonly exercised upon reports of the miraculous in the New Testament, it is to these that I now turn, and I make concerning them my third reflexion: *their supervenient isolation*. Which I proceed to explain.

At times in the past, I have been concerned with two topics—contraception and transubstantiation—in which I have had to point out that what I was attacking was, for better or worse, now isolated from the setting it used to have. What I called 'the Roman Position' on contraception made at least some sense in the context of the older subordination of sexuality to procreation, but makes very little now that the subordination has gone; and transubstantiation,

once apparently of a piece with scholastic philosophy, has survived the demise of that activity in the Church, to linger on as a forlornly abrupt technicality. In examples like these, conservative apologetic never really engages with the point at issue, because what it sets itself to defend is only a fragment of a miscellaneous and largely disregarded inheritance. And so it is, I think, with believing in miracle-stories just because they are in the Gospels—the belief is artificially restricted to one sample of a wide range of narratives, for the ancient world teems with stories of the sort that no one now feels obliged to defend at all. Claims to and tales of the marvellous must be among the most venerable of human compositions. Which, of course, does not make them false, but it is also true that some kinds of civilization throw up such stories in a way that others do not (to quote my mother, ‘I’d believe in a miracle if it happened in Oslo’); that the New Testament was written in a tradition that favoured the miraculous; that mankind as a whole seems to have an ineradicable propensity to magnify the marvellous; and that narrative which takes care of Khartoum-propositions is, as any lawyer knows, difficult of attainment and thin on the ground.

It is of course possible to make an exception of the New Testament, fencing it off from judgments passed upon the rest. It is even possible to fence off the Gospels only, leaving Ananias and Sapphira (and the apostolic gaol-breaks) to fend for themselves. But we shall do better if we acknowledge the tradition within which the evangelists put together what they did, and then judge each story on its merits. Verdicts here are more personal than we tend to admit, but we shall at least be aware of the conflicting criteria of which our judgments must take account. We are dealing with now isolated survivors of a mass of stories that are now dead, and that our belief in God’s provident love will not bring back to life. The Scriptures are held by believers to embody this love in a special way, and believers should, in estimating what is in the stories, bear this in mind. But they must bear other things in mind as well. We have to live with a paradox. On the one hand, the New Testament contains texts of a particularity and individuality to which pagan antiquity can hardly offer a parallel (the first two chapters of Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis* are interesting here). On the other hand, writers in the New Testament have treated those texts with such a freedom that we are left with a patchwork of varied reliability for giving our assent to the kind of assertions that I have called Khartoum-propositions. Whatever else be said about the literary forms of biblical texts that narrate miracles, this variance in reliability due to freedom of treatment must be squarely faced.

With respect to Dummett and to Kerr, the point at which to start is not the sincerity or insincerity of the New Testament writers, but

how they chose to write. We cannot expect them to be reliable about all statements of simple facts, the sort that are involved in all communication. We cannot expect it, just as (to go to another civilisation, with this time a rhetorical tradition to obfuscate such statements) we cannot expect the *Agricola* to be reliable about geographical details in Scotland. To be sure, we can get information on the point from it, just as we can get information from the New Testament, and ancillary disciplines are helping us to get even more from both, but neither the evangelists nor Tacitus are at home with a certain family of propositions that interest us nowadays. If Athens has little to do with Jerusalem, Khartoum has even less.

I pass in my fourth reflexion to the theme that is central to Dummett's complaint at some modern exegesis: *are the stories deceptive?*

In one sense some obviously are if modern exegesis is right, because then orthodox belief will have been wrong over the centuries in taking them as true. To this problem—the tension in belief between past and present—I will return at the end of this article, so I turn here to the other sense of the question: were the first readers (hearers, rather) of the stories deceived by their apparent form, or were they not, being aware of the literary convention according to which the stories were composed? Put it like that, and the question collapses—you had as well ask whether a Bushman is aware of Levi-Strauss on the structuralist approach to myths. Where the wonderful is, there will the peoples be gathered together, and there will they abandon their habitual standards of judgment. I see no reason to believe that the first generation of Christians was any more discriminating than the present, and those who have tried to extract evidence from witnesses will know just how little discrimination there is in such matters. It is not a matter of deception, things would be easier for us if it were; it is a matter of the first Christians' being insensitive to the value of historical comparison, of detached investigation, and of cross-questioning fragmentary accounts of the marvellous. The insensitivity does not exclude the survival of true Khartoum-propositions, but it does call for caution over what was not cautiously said. The author of John's gospel puts it nicely when he makes the Samaritan woman (could he have modelled her on one of his converts?) enlarge the remark of Jesus on her matrimonial history to 'He told me all that ever I did' (John iv 39). That is what people are like, and in some cultures they are even more like. We know about cultural variety, and cannot pretend we do not. Reports of discourses and wonders, orally and severally transmitted, and transmitted where there was a strong tradition of enlarging the marvellous' and of organising material into patterns, have given us the results that we have inherited. So we must, among many other things, cast a cold eye

at our inheritance.

But there is yet more to be said about the setting of miracle-stories, and it forms my fifth reflexion: *the subsequent career of the stories*. What modern exegesis does surely is perturbing, Dummett surely is right to be perturbed, and Kerr surely does underestimate the gravity of the matter when he writes 'it would not be the first time that a major shift has occurred in the history of Bible reading' (Kerr 1977, p. 121). Surely this is not a shift, major or minor, *ce n'est pas une révolte, c'est une révolution*. It touches for Roman Catholics the whole 'mode' of the tradition of their religion. Until recently, belief in post-biblical miracles was one of the greatest divisions between Catholic and Protestant; I have long marvelled that oecumenical discussions today do not touch this classic point of difference, and if it be said that the point has ceased to divide, I marvel even more. For it means that Catholics have not noticed that, just as there has been an isolation of biblical miracles from contemporary narratives, so there has been an isolation of them from the whole series of interventions that was once held to have followed what is in the Bible.

The shift in opinion is of the first importance, because the two isolations are part of a much wider growth of *naturalism*. Let it never be forgotten that modern exegesis of the Bible inherits a tradition that was founded in great part by men who had little time for revealed religion at all. Different as are the accounts of the gospels given now from those given by eighteenth-century Deists, the two have a *secularity* in common that is all-important—a policy of not making a special case of Scripture. If I understand Dummett, it is just such a case that he considers exegetes should make (Dummett, p. 58), and I think that his opinion goes to the heart of the whole matter.

But there is more to this reflexion on the subsequent history of the stories than naturalism. I have been at some pains to point out that the reshaping by the Evangelists of their material sacrificed Khartoum-propositions. But does that matter, it may be asked; does not even my facetious terminology shew that what is at stake is trivial? Unfortunately, the only proper answer is: 'You never can tell'. Take the story in Mark xii, where Jesus has been questioned by Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees. A Scribe is impressed by his replies, asks what is the first commandment of all, praises the answer he gets, and is praised in return. Now consider how different is the parallel passage in Matthew xxii. Here, the Pharisees see that Jesus has silenced the Sadducees and come together against him. One of them puts him to the test with the same question and receives substantially the same answer, but with no praise exchanged at all. The two stories cannot both be true, and I accept for the sake of argument the common opinion that it is Matthew who has made the change. The change might seem of little weight. But then the questioner is a Scribe, and to

change this particular Scribe's motive is to assign him the usual role that Scribes and Pharisees play in the Gospel—it is to make the story into yet another anecdote of their enmity, when it was once an exception that might give pause for thought, might shew that friend and foe were not, after all, so immediately distinguishable. Go on a generation to John's Gospel, and the distinction of friend from foe is sharper still: Jesus is now contrasted with "the Jews". Take that phrase as conventional, by all means; take it as you please: it is there, in the Gospel, and we all know how the phrase was read in later days.

You never can tell, that is the trouble. Khartoum-propositions need not be exciting, but respect for them does exercise upon us the salutary discipline of directing our thoughts to what is the case. Saying 'what is the case' undoubtedly calls for far more than Khartoum-propositions, but it does call for them, and if we neglect them we are liable to be at the mercy of picturesquenesses of our own devising. I am not concerned with blaming those who gave us the New Testament, I am pointing to the limitations of what they have given. The austerity of simple factual statements has been a late growth in human culture, and it is not in itself robust. But it has grown, and we may not disregard it.

I pass to the sixth and last of my reflexions, which I consider to be the most urgent of them all, for it is already at work, and we have got to deal with it: it is *the specious advantage which the Roman Catholic Church stands to gain from modern exegesis*.

Pictures in our own time are replacing texts. That notorious truth explains the present state of our religion, where ecclesiology is being daily shaped, not by argument, not by liturgy, but by television. The complexity of the Church's structure is being pictorially condensed (as I lamented in FitzPatrick 1982) into the public appearances of a talkatively ubiquitous Pope. Vatican II offered a less childish view of the Church, and we even hear at times of what is going to be expected of Vatican III. I am more concerned at the vigorous life displayed at the turn of a switch by Vatican I. But if I am concerned, I cannot pretend to be surprised. Vatican I is what Catholic television is about. The pictures on the screen have no past to jar with the present, they are a *nunc fluens*, a continuous performance that has only its own rules, and needs only to be looked at. Analyse they cannot, for analysis calls for words, and words are not what their medium is about. A text is different. A text has all the gritty particularity of its age, and offers as such a challenge to later ages. Small wonder that Trent made a claim for the Church's interpretative power over Scripture, for it made the claim when the biblical text, freshly scrutinised, seemed to speak in favour of the Protestants and against the Catholics. But the biblical text is not now what it then was, criticism has seen to that; and with scriptural power diminished, the



Church's interpretative claim seems no longer polemical, but natural. Modern exegesis, once condemned and cast out by Rome, proves for it a blessing in disguise.

The blessing is not only disguised, it is utterly specious. The Bible has lost the absoluteness it once had because of the naturalistic and relativising character of historical criticism. To apply it to the Bible while exempting the Church would, as Matthew Arnold put it, be as silly as arguing that, because there are no fairies, therefore there must be gnomes (Arnold, p. 120). But applying it to the Church is bound to be more painful, as there can be no distancing of it from the present state of things of which we ourselves are a part, so we must not be surprised if criticism of the Bible goes with silence as to what this means for the Church. Such inconsistency followed last year's programme on Channel 4, 'Jesus: the Evidence', the first item on the list of events that has prompted these reflexions of mine. I confess that I gave up the struggle after watching the first episode, but I cannot believe that the rest can have been as confused and bad as the next item on my list: the 'reply' to the series provided by a group of theologians, labelled 'Catholic Response', and published in Catholic Information Services' *Cathnews*; references are by part and section-number. The cause of its confusion and badness was starkly simple: disarray in the Creed which the theologians had been enlisted to defend. See how they wrote.

The Response first blames the programme's sensational presentation of the question, without asking whether *any* presentation on a medium like television can do the question justice, and without (of course) a word on what the same medium is doing to our own presentation of the Christian faith. It has predictable ambiguities, like 'working in a spirit of scientific integrity and humble faith' (2/1), and it also throws up the kind of textual burp prized by deconstructionists: 'the four Gospels do not always (indeed often) give us the "very words" of Jesus' (3/5). It describes 'a radical school' as working with 'faulty criteria and unscientific presuppositions' (2/1)—happy memories of my neo-scholastic textbooks, with their *Kantius est wrongus!* The majority of biblical scholars, it claims, accept the substantial historicity of the Gospels (2/1). Whether this majority includes the writers of the response must remain doubtful, given their admissions: some or all of the titles like 'Son of God' 'Son of Man' and 'Messiah' were not used in Jesus' lifetime (2/3); in a sense, he never intended to found a Church (2/5); the discovery of the tomb of Jesus as being empty, and after his death, his appearances to his disciples, are not absolutely essential to the Christian faith (3/8). As if this did not throw enough obscurity over the term 'historicity', the response also deploys the standard euphemisms of modern exegesis, and (I think) adds a phrase of its own. 'Elaborate': evangelists do this

to historical traditions (2/2), and so did those who passed on accounts of the Easter appearances (2/7). 'Embellish': the evangelists did this to their material about the empty tomb (2/7). 'Interpret': they try to give history a theological interpretation (2/2), early Christians interpreted and reinterpreted (what's the difference?) the miracles of Jesus, and the process is 'at an advanced stage' (sounds like a disease) in the Fourth Gospel (2/6). Most of all, 'meditate', which is surely a Catholic word? The Fourth Gospel is the 'fruit of profound meditation on the mystery of Jesus' (2/4). Just what the term is meant to suggest appears in 2/7, where Matthew and Luke have 'meditated more deeply' on Mark's account—so that Luke replaces Mark's young man in a white robe with two men in brilliant colours, and Matthew replaces him with an angel. I rather think I prefer fundamentalism.

If the document exhibits a lack of candour in what it does say, it exhibits even less in what it does not. 'It is several decades now since the magisterium gave its full approval to an honest and sensible use of (historical criticism)' (2/1). Indeed things have been easier of late for the exegete, but the reasons are quite alien to the Church—fundamentalism became comically indefensible and the old men died off. But the structure that inflicted the bullying and dishonesty is still with us, as Küng and Schillebeeckx know (or are we to take the Response as holding their criticism to be dishonest or senseless?). All this disreputable past the Response blithely ignores, while retaining from that past the mystifying vocabulary of 'magisterium'. I rather think I prefer Pius X.

The concessions made to criticism by the Response reduce to farce the suggestion found in the *Universe* that we should be humbly grateful for guidance (see p. 113). Guidance has nothing to do with it. The claim of the Church to interpret Scripture authentically is in any case logically odd ("that will must be genuine, because it says I can decide on its genuineness"), but it has now become an anachronism: debates about the Bible are not going to be terminated by ecclesiastical intervention. Small wonder that there has been such little noise from us during the concatenation of events. With the model of authoritative decision weakened, the nature of the game has been radically changed.

And there lies hope, because the change, if honestly faced, might free us from the pictures that hold us captive, by making us acknowledge the circularity that Christian belief exhibits in its spread over time. We are indeed in a circle, a circle of evidence, texts, traditions, worship, pronouncements and experience; there is no absolute sticking place, be it Bible or Church or anything else; neither present nor past has the last word, there is no last word (for an analysis in this sense of the debate over infallibility raised by Küng, see FitzPatrick 1974). The acceptance by the Roman Catholic Church of

the demands of biblical criticism must not be allowed to reinforce the tendencies implicit in the pictorialising to which that Church is now being subjected. It should rather shew the way out of the Church's pervading and profound sickness.

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I have disclaimed the professional skills of an exegete, but am I not now obliged to submit my own beliefs for judgment? What do I personally make of the New Testament writings of which I have had so much to say?

*Ecclesia meretrix.* I use the phrase to bring out a characteristic of those who first heard the Gospel, a characteristic found still among many who believe it. Prostitutes endure many evils, of which two need mentioning here: exploitation, and the pressure to tell lies. That is why they are paradigmatic of those squeezed out to the margins of society, and, as more than one article in *New Blackfriars* has pointed out, it was on such marginal people that the Gospel seems to have made its first impression. Should we be so very surprised that they responded to the good news in ways that do not come up to the standards of veracity that we ourselves rightly prefer? For people like that, a systematic care over what I have called 'Khartoum-propositions' is beyond conceiving. It is the old story of the choice between evils—a warm heart and a willingness to admit one's needs do not go as smoothly as we should like with coolness and caution. Care, it is said, killed the cat; it might be better to say that, with too much care, there will never be cats or life at all—*inter urinas et faeces nascimur omnes*. On the other hand, life does not stay there, and would not survive long if it tried to. I will not read the Gospel with the same unquestioning belief that there must have been in many who first heard it, and has been in so many since. I will not, because of habits of mind that I regard as centrally important for life, and that I have no intention of discarding. But I am not going to reject the Gospel because I have reservations about the nature and limitations of the form in which it has come down. The force of the Gospel comes through and over all the dubiousness of its expression. The conflict of goodness with life's evil; the going down into the dark, to make whole those hurt and confused by it (*ecclesia meretrix*); words that strike and hearten and terrify and console—for all the fables and concoctions, the good news is there, you had as well try to argue away the sea.

What does this mean in practice? What, for instance, do I make of the miracles? That power shewed itself in bodily, tangible works of mercy, seems to me beyond doubt, if one is to accept any of the evidence at all. Further details are another matter. The pleasure taken by the Evangelists in edifying patterns, in echoing earlier texts and so

on, is just as palpable for me as are the narratives and discourses themselves. I accept the substance of modern exegesis ('modern', of course, in a very modified sense, it is the critical and naturalistic approach that really matters, and that has been with us for ages). Accepting it, I spell out its sceptical consequences in ways that exegetes tend not to; and I find the scepticism congenial to my other judgments in Ancient History.

Perhaps 'Not Proven' puts it best, for I think there usually obtains in decisions over such accounts a 'verdict-vacuum'. They may be true, for God is almighty; but I know much less about God's unsearchable ways than I do about the notorious propensities of my fellow-men to exaggeration and credulity. Miracle-stories are for some settings, including the Bible, a narrational habit. If I believe too little, it is because I know too much.

To take an obvious example, what lies behind the Infancy Narratives? Certainly the belief that Jesus was virginally conceived, so that belief is a very old one. I naturally concede that the belief may be true, and that quite a case can be made out for reconciling with it other texts in the New Testament that apparently contradict it. But then I look at what Matthew and Luke have severally made of the belief; and I know that this detachment from details of fact goes with the tradition in which they composed their stories; and the belief itself, so very much a detail of fact, is found inside that same tradition; and I remain unconvinced.

What of the Easter stories? That there were appearances seems to me to be on the same level as that there were works of healing—if there be anything in the stuff at all, then that much is in it. What the appearances amounted to, I do not know, and I do not see what point there is in debates over choosing concepts in which to express something without parallel (see Dupré, and Kerr's second article). But not everything here is without parallel. An empty tomb is not; we can easily make Khartoum-propositions about something like that. What then of the empty tomb and the visits made to it? I should indeed like these stories to be true, because I should like the Resurrection, whatever else it is, to be as tangible and as absolute as were the Crucifixion and Death. I have no sympathy whatever with those who write as if the fate of the body of Jesus were not important (how unkind can you get?), or as if believing in the Resurrection meant believing that the cause of Jesus goes on (sounds like a demo). Though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: that is the way I want my Redeemer to live, and to be alive for evermore. And it may all be so. The preserved inconsistencies of the stories may point back to what is oldest of all. So may the featuring in them of women, who had been put well in their place by the time the Gospels were written down. The tomb may have been empty; I should

like to go there, hoping it might be so.

Only, what I should like to have been, and what I hope has been, is not the same as what I believe to have been. The trouble for me lies in getting behind what I earlier called 'supervenient isolation': it is *what else* that is proposed for belief that makes me uncertain. What, for instance, is more vivid and arresting than the journey to Emmaus? And yet that story also includes the enlightenment of the two by the Risen Lord as to what things in the Old Testament are about him—the kind of exegesis we have already seen attributed to Peter, and can find so often in Matthew. Just so, the story of the empty tomb would be easier for me to accept if there were not a story of other empty tombs (Matt. xxvii, 52–53) and if there had not been a species of rehearsal for it all in the raising of Lazarus. And, of course, there is always the Ascension. Perhaps a softened version of a scholastic tag can sum up my reaction: *qui nimis probat, minus probat*; prove too much, and you prove less than you would like to.

But what about my Sunday mornings in the pulpit? I confess before I start that I do not know how one is to combine a critical awareness of the past with the zeal that sometimes goes with those who never think about such things at all. To begin with, then, regular preaching to a regular congregation is preaching one sermon, not many. A sense of the tension between past and present, and of how God's work is embodied in their limitations, is something which cannot be briskly expounded, it is a long-term job and is understood by degrees and through a multitude of examples. The examples need to be generous in their range and not all religious—the trouble that goes with criticising the Bible while exempting the Church comes from fighting shy of generosity here, for generosity opens us to the World. Those who have found my reflexions unacceptable might try going from orthodoxy to orthopraxy for a moment: 'Liberation Theology' can indeed claim for itself themes in the New Testament, but it cannot claim all of them, and it makes the selection it does because of *the pressure of the secular*—and it is the same pressure that makes for the criticism I have been concerned with.

The tension between past and present is particularly acute in our own Church, which now finds itself (as Macaulay once said of Peel) 'doing penance for the disingenuousness of years'. The lack of candour has been and is understandable, because what is at stake is the refusal to make exceptions in favour of an authority that has long enjoyed this privilege. The crisis of Modernism was essentially about history (FitzPatrick 1973), and the bill it presented is now having to be paid. The cost is high because what is at stake is greater than simple rejection of disciplinary excess or credal exaggeration. People of Dummett's views have every right to regard what is suggested as dangerous, and those who disagree with him must not try to pretend

that what they are suggesting is simply a new presentation of the same old story. They might hearten themselves and others with the thought that tension between present and past in the Church at least shews that the past is still alive there, because the past is today a very endangered species. Whatever else Roman Catholicism is, it is extremely old, has weathered many storms, and has a highly assorted history behind it. Surely it has a better part to play in our time than trivialising itself on the model of television? But do not let us deceive ourselves as to what interests are served by that model, or as to its force, or as to its present and increasing reality. The reflexions I have offered will, if taken seriously, call for some very profound dissent indeed.

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