

Biblical Exegesis and the Resurrection

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The Second Vatican Council taught that, in interpreting Holy Scripture, we must search out the meanings intended by the sacred writers, and that, in doing so, we must have regard for literary forms. I write as a layman in such matters, and will probably make mistakes on important points of detail: but I venture to write on the subject because I doubt that my general assessment is wrong. This is that, in the style of Biblical criticism now apparently prevalent within the Catholic Church, the appeal to literary forms has become little more than a formal device, serving to conceal, possibly from themselves, what the exegetes really mean; and what they mean is usually something inconsistent with any belief, however qualified, in the inspiration of Scripture, and often with more fundamental articles of Christian faith.

The general principle that we must take account of the literary form adopted is clear and evident. What is intended to be read as allegory must be read as allegory; what is written as fiction or as historical romance must be read as fiction or as historical romance. In reading historical accounts, we must try to assess what liberties the author was allowing himself, and not give a misplaced weight to details for which he was not meaning to vouch: we must distinguish reporting from reconstruction, must be aware of the use of devices such as compression and dramatisation. But, in applying this principle, we must, as much as in all other matters, submit to the evidence, not bend it to our will. Acceptance of the principle of literary forms is an acknowledgment of the more general principle that inspiration is not dictation. The inspired writers did not act as transcribing machines: it was not merely the hand that held the pen that was inspired, but the creative human mind itself. To say that is to say that what we read in the Bible is true in the sense intended by the writers. Hence, in particular, to say that some book or passage exhibits such-and-such a literary form is to say something about how the writer or compiler intended it to be understood. It is nonsense to ascribe some literary form to a part of Scripture unless it is supposed that it was composed in accordance with that form. Such a supposition is a hypothesis, whose probability must be evaluated by ordinary standards. It is unlikely that there should be any literary form of which some Biblical work is the only, or even the first, example. There can, indeed, be a literary experiment, an

isolated example of a literary form, for instance *Finnegan's Wake*; but such cases are, of necessity, exceedingly rare. A literary form is, normally, governed by an accepted convention: to make it plausible that a particular work exemplifies a given such form, it will usually be necessary to show that that form was familiar at the time of its composition. It is even more unlikely that, from the moment some work was written, its literary form was misjudged. Later generations may have misunderstood the writer's intention, as a result of some subsequent change in literary conventions: but to suppose that he was misunderstood from the very start would not merely be to suppose that he was a quite extraordinarily unsuccessful writer; it would be to throw the gravest doubt on any interpretation that required that supposition.

The appeals made in current Biblical exegesis to the principle of literary forms pay no attention to the demands of credibility: they have become a mere technique for enabling the exegete, without formally denying the truthfulness of the Biblical writers, to believe the same as any critic uncommitted to their truthfulness. Thus, for instance, it is common to say that the explanation of the parable of the sower which the synoptic Gospels represent our Lord as giving was not his, and does not reflect the interpretation which he intended, but is, rather, an adaptation of the parable to the situation of the early Church. If you see no reason to avoid imputing to the evangelists an attempt to give a spurious authority to a reinterpretation of the parable, you may find this convincing. What is unconvincing is the suggestion that this was a well understood literary device—that the original readers of the Gospel would not have supposed that Jesus himself gave any such explanation of the parable, or that he intended it to be understood in that way. On the contrary, it seems patently implausible: and we have, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, a case in which St. Paul is scrupulous to indicate what he is saying with the direct authority of Christ and what only on his own authority. If we start with a prior commitment to the truthfulness of the authors, then, naturally, our estimates of probability will be different: what might otherwise be probable becomes impossible; what would otherwise be improbable becomes impossible; what would otherwise be improbable becomes probable. But to assess probabilities as if we had no such commitment, and then preserve our commitment by appealing to literary forms even when that appeal is wildly implausible, is, at root, dishonest; and this dishonesty infects most modern Catholic Biblical exegesis.

Take, again, the authorship of the Second Epistle of St. Peter. There are plausible arguments for saying that this epistle was writ-

ten well after St. Peter's death. It has become standard to accept these arguments, and to explain away the internal claims to St. Peter's authorship as a well known literary device, like the attribution of wisdom books to King Solomon. It does appear that, with the wisdom literature, this was an accepted convention, not intended to deceive anybody, as also, perhaps, with the attribution of apocalyptic works to ancient Old Testament characters: but it is very hard to swallow the suggestion that this epistle, which belongs to neither of these categories, was written in accordance with a similar convention as if by an apostle, not from the remote or legendary past, but one who died within living memory. If there was any such convention, it was very soon, and very mysteriously, forgotten: the epistle was surely admitted to the New Testament canon just because it was believed to be of apostolic authorship. In the middle of the second century, at any rate, the attitude to fraudulent writings had changed a great deal from that presupposed by the hypothesis of any such literary form: Tertullian relates how a presbyter of Asia was detected as the author of a spurious *Acts of Paul* and consequently degraded from office. Besides, the epistle does not read as though the pretence of Petrine authorship were a mere literary device: it reads as though the writer is claiming the authority of St. Peter, especially in the passage about having been an eyewitness of the Lord. If this letter was written after the death of St. Peter, then, surely, it is an imposture. If someone thinks it consistent with the Catholic faith to hold that such an imposture was included in the canon, he may say so; anyone who thinks, as I do, that it is not, must take the evidence for the late composition of the work to be misleading. The least plausible position is to attempt to have it both ways, by pretending the existence of a literary convention for which there is no shred of evidence and which is intrinsically unlikely.

The infancy narratives in the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke are, we are usually told, examples of *Midrash*. Hence, it is explained, they are not meant to be taken as having any historical authenticity, but are mere romances, in Old Testament vein, of which we are intended to pay attention only to the symbolic content. Now, indeed, if there were a well known style of literary composition, consisting in the narration of imaginary stories about real people, the significance of which was meant to lie in their echoes of the Old Testament and the symbolic meaning of those echoes, we should certainly consider seriously whether those narratives were intended to be read as examples of that style. Actually, there is no such style: *midrash* is something quite different. There are examples of a midrashic type of exegesis in the New Testament;

St. Paul's disquisition on the two sons of Abraham in the Epistle to the Galatians is one. But however, the infancy narratives are to be understood, it is just an abuse of words to call them *midrash*: it derives from a habit of mind in accordance with which you first decide what you want to think, and then adopt some formula to cover it, however little it fits.

These general observations bear on the recent article 'Catholic Faith and Easter Stories: Reflections on Hubert Richards,' by the Rev. Fergus Kerr, O.P., and the accompanying editorial (*New Blackfriars*, Vol. 57, August, 1976). 'The question', Fr. Kerr writes, 'is ... what liberty a Catholic has to treat the Easter narratives' in the Gospels 'as a special kind of fiction'. We cannot answer this question without simultaneously trying to say what, if those narratives *are* fiction, the evangelists were attempting to teach us by means of them; and, since they relate to the central item of our faith, what it is that we are to believe if we so interpret the Gospels. *What* teaching was it to which St. Paul referred when he said, 'we testified of God that he raised Christ', and on which he commented that 'if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain and faith is in vain' (1 Cor. 15:14-15)? What did St. Luke intend us to understand St. Peter as asserting when he represented him as proclaiming that God raised Jesus up, raised him from the dead (Acts 2:24, 32; 4:10)? Before we can ask what happened at the first Easter, we must ask what it was that the evangelists intended their readers to suppose had happened; and we must ask also what, in their preaching, the apostles told their listeners had happened; and whether the two messages were the same.

To what effect can the original preaching of the Resurrection have been? The apostles had, clearly, something to proclaim that counteracted the effect, on the claim that Jesus was the Christ, of his humiliating public execution: not just an announcement that what had seemed total defeat had been a victory, but a fact or an event to prove it. What can this fact or this event have been? Surely not just the fact (or claim) that, while Jesus had suffered bodily death, his soul had survived. For almost all pagans, and for many Jews, some kind of disembodied existence after death was an accepted belief. Among many Jews at the time of Jesus, it was agreed that the just were received, after their death, into Paradise or 'the bosom of Abraham'; and Jesus was known to have endorsed that belief, as well as the more specific teaching about the resurrection. Anyone who thought that the souls of all the righteous are in the hand of God would expect those who believed Jesus to have been among the righteous to say the same of him: such a message would be no startling news. Moreover, if this was the message, what sig-

nificance could the mention, already to be found in St. Paul (1 Cor. 15:4), of the 'third day' possess? What would be the point of the turn of phrase, 'God raised Jesus from the dead', or of the quotation, made in the Acts both by St. Peter and by St. Paul, of the psalm verse, 'Thou wilt not ... let thy Holy One see corruption' (2:27-32; 13:35-37)? It does not fit what has come down to us of the earliest preaching to suppose that, at the outset, the message was one of a purely spiritual survival, even one warranted by some kind of communication which the apostles claimed to have received from their dead Master. Such a claim would have very little probative force—that is just the kind of illusion to which men are subject when they have suffered the traumatic loss of a revered leader; and, in any case, what it purported to prove would be nothing astounding.

Christianity, even more than Judaism and Islam, has always set its face against a purely spiritual immortality; it has always linked its promise of the future life with that of bodily resurrection. Whatever the precise interpretation of the Gospel accounts of Christ's Resurrection, nothing in the New Testament record suggests that, in this salient feature of Christian belief, we have been unfaithful to our origins; and, if we have, then Christianity was distorted from the very start, and loses all credibility. Everything points to the inescapable fact, one, until quite recently, always taken for granted, that what from the first the apostles proclaimed, truly or falsely, was not the survival of the spirit of Jesus, but the restoration of his bodily life.

On this, Hubert Richards, the author of the work, *The First Easter: What Really Happened?* that inspired Fr. Kerr's article, would wholly concur. For him, the Resurrection really took place, and it was a *bodily* Resurrection, not the passing of Jesus into a state of disembodied existence. Nevertheless, this bodily Resurrection did not in any way affect the corpse of Jesus which had been left in the tomb, and remained there unless it was removed by grave robbers. Nor did it involve that Jesus assumed some other human body, distinct from all those belonging to other individuals. What, then, did it consist in? It consisted, according to Richards, in his becoming one with all men, entering on a new mode of being amounting to an embodied sharing of himself with others. From the moment of the Resurrection, which, Richards thinks, is also the moment of Christ's death (and not the third day), he became embodied in other men. The Gospel stories of the Resurrection appearances of our Lord are pictorial representations of the disciples' coming to realise this; seeing the risen Christ and believing in the Resurrection are, he says, one and the same thing.

Now there is no doubt whatever that the New Testament teaches that, through Baptism, we come to share in the life of Christ; and it has always been Christian belief that we do this, and that this share is strengthened by the sacraments, above all the Eucharist. It is also clear that anyone who believes that Jesus Christ was God as well as man cannot suppose that he was destroyed by death. But belief in the Resurrection is at least the belief that Christ's death did not terminate even his existence as a man. One could believe that, just as, when Mary conceived, the Word was made man, so, at the death of Jesus, the Word divested Himself of the humanity He had assumed: but, obviously, that is not the Christian belief. The Christian belief is that Jesus Christ still lives as a man; not just as a disembodied soul, which is not a man, but only an incomplete part of a man, but as a complete human being, and therefore with a living human body. Richards explains this by saying that, at his death, Christ became embodied in other men. Is this just a metaphor? No, Richards says: the Christian assertion that the human community is the Body of Christ is not a metaphor but a sober statement of fact. So what, precisely, is the fact which he takes it to state? Presumably that, upon his death, Christ came to be related to other men in just that way in which, before he died, he had been related to his own body.

What can this mean? A man's body is a physical system, functioning in that manner we call 'living': some of its movements are under his control, and they are the only physical events that are directly so; on the operation of its sensory apparatus his sensations, and hence his perceptions of the material world, including his body, depend. We do not ascribe sensations, perceptions, emotions, thoughts, decisions, intentions, voluntary actions or a wide range of involuntary ones to the body, but to the man himself: to the body we ascribe only the properties of the physical system as such, and those features of its functioning that ordinarily lie beyond his control. So much is indisputable. Why some things that can be predicated of a man can *ipso facto* be predicated of his body, others not, is a matter for philosophical explanation. On one account, it is because the body is only a part of the man, a part which is to some extent directed by another, immaterial part. On a rival account, it is because a living body is not, as such, a self-subsistent thing at all, like the man himself: rather, to refer to a man's body is to refer to the man, but considered only under a certain aspect, that is, taking only a limited range of properties and operations into account. There may be yet other possible explanations; but, for our purpose, it does not matter: we need attend only to what, concerning the meaning of the expression 'his body', is beyond controversy. This,

by itself, is enough to show that it is senseless to suppose that a *man* could literally be part of another man's body. In speaking of him as a man, we are speaking of him as the possible subject of any predicate that can significantly be applied to a man—as one who performs voluntary actions, perceives external objects, decides for or against the truth of various propositions, is, say, sometimes afraid, usually generous, etc. Such a being cannot be—that is, cannot meaningfully be said to be—part of another man's body, because, in speaking of the body and its parts, we are excluding the application of a great range of such predicates, including all those just cited. Richards's account of the Resurrection—of what the apostles intended to be understood as proclaiming and the evangelists intended to be understood as pictorially recounting—is thus flatly unintelligible: not in the sense of leaving questions we do not know how to answer, but in the more radical sense of conveying nothing whatsoever.

We should, indeed, have no great difficulty if the statement that Christ came to be embodied in other men were said to be metaphorical: then it becomes a variant of a very familiar metaphor, of whose significance we have some grasp. But, as I remarked, Richards insists that it is *not* a metaphor, but literally true, a sober statement of fact; and I confess I have not the remotest idea what it would be for it to be literally true. We have, in trying to understand Richards, to remember that this claim is, for him, the *whole* content of the doctrine of the Resurrection, not a further consequence of it. He is very explicit about this: take away people, he says, and Jesus would be a nonentity. (I hope that he here means that the *man* Jesus Christ would no longer exist: he can hardly suppose that the existence of the Second Person of the Godhead depends on the continued existence of the human race.) Of course, in advancing this thesis, Richards is relying heavily upon St. Paul's teaching about the Church as the Body of Christ (although, for Richards, the Church seems to have become 'the human community'—St. Paul's emphasis on baptism seems to be largely or wholly played down). But to take this item of St. Paul's teaching as providing us with the content of the claim that Christ rose from the dead is to overlook what seems to me the evident fact that it *is* intended to be understood as metaphorically expressed. When we speak of an organisation or society as a 'body', when we speak of those who belong to it as its 'members', when we speak of its president as its 'head', we are extending St. Paul's metaphor (which, admittedly, has become a virtually dead one in these contexts) to cover other groups than the association of Christians to which he originally applied it. That St. Paul meant it to be understood metaphorically is clear from the fact

that he does not hesitate to mix his metaphors: in Ephesians, chap V, he switches back and forth between the images of the Church as the body of Christ and as his bride; in chap II of the same epistle, we have both the image of the Church as Christ's body and that of it as a temple of which Christ is the corner-stone. Moreover, he uses the image in different ways in different passages: sometimes we are said to be members one of another; often Christ is said to be the head of the body. This is perfectly tolerable if what we are concerned with is just an image, intended to convey an important truth but not to be taken as more than an image, and has never occasioned any difficulty: but the moment anyone insists that it is not an image, but a literal account, the variations become intolerable. How can the organs of a body be *each other's* organs? How can a man be the head of his own body, i.e. his own head? Of course, we are not meant to ask such silly questions: but the *reason* we are not meant to do so—the reason why they *are* silly—is that we were never meant to try to take this teaching literally in the first place; as soon as we attempt to do so, we cannot stop these questions from arising. 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ', wrote St. Paul (1 Cor. 12:12). Could there be a clearer signal of the use of figurative language than that 'just as'?

Not, indeed, that we need a signal, any more than we need one to tell us that St. John did not mean to put into our Lord's mouth a literal assertion that he was a vine, or into St. John the Baptist's mouth the assertion that he was literally a lamb. True, in writings in which startling claims are made, we must be on our guard lest the commonsense on which we normally rely to guide us what to take figuratively and what literally should lead us to take in the former way what we are meant to take in the latter: in this we pay attention both to context and to the tradition of interpreting the Scriptures that has been handed down to us. St. Paul's epistles are reflective disquisitions on a faith already delivered, which, on any showing, abound in metaphors: on any showing, since, even if one phrase that has always been understood metaphorically was meant to be taken literally, by that very fact the conflicting images have to be taken as metaphors: a man cannot marry his own body, nor can a literal cornerstone be a literal head. Construed as a metaphor, the image of the Church as Christ's body is really intelligible; it is presented in no different way from the other images: there is no need to take it as other than a metaphor, no indication that we are supposed to do so. By contrast, when we get to that part of any of the Gospels that concerns what happened after the burial of Jesus, we are reading the conclusion of a *narrative*. Granted, Richards will

assure us that this is a special kind of narrative, unfamiliar to us, one in which the writer does not mean to vouch for any of the details and does not scruple to include substantial details solely for the symbolic effect. For all that, I do not suppose that he will deny that the evangelists intended to convey that the main outlines of the events were as they record. After all, the accounts of the Resurrection follow immediately upon those of the Passion. Hubert Richards, besides writing *The First Easter: What Really Happened?* has also written *The First Christmas: What Really Happened?* and *The Miracles of Jesus: What Really Happened?* but he has not written any book entitled *The Crucifixion: What Really Happened?* and I do not imagine that even he would want to deny that our Lord was really arrested, tried, crucified and buried, or that the evangelists wanted us to understand that these things had really happened to him. So we come to the Resurrection narratives immediately after an account of an overwhelmingly important event, which, at least in its main outline, each evangelist is wanting us to understand as having actually taken place. Moreover, we know that we are going to read about something of a very surprising kind, either from the prophecies that the Son of Man would be raised on the third day we have read earlier in the Gospel or from our knowledge of the subsequent preaching of the apostles. However the statement that Jesus has been raised from the dead was to be understood, it must express the occurrence of something pretty startling, and of something for which the apostles could claim to have real evidence, unless, on explanation, it was to appear no more than a verbal swindle. So we read the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection expecting to have a continuation of the narrative, a continuation that will inform us what the apostles came to believe and how they came to believe it: however much we shall be prepared to give a symbolic value to the details of the narrative, we shall naturally assume that, in main outline, it will tell, as far as can be told, what actually took place. That is the kind of book we are reading. While, therefore, the natural presumption is that the images occurring in St. Paul's writings are to be interpreted metaphorically, as that concerning the Church as the body of Christ has always been, the equally natural presumption concerning the Gospels is that they will contain an account of events in broad outline as they happened. It is no surprise to be told that metaphor is employed in the New Testament: *that* is not the novelty of Richard's interpretation. The novelty lies in the fact that, where anyone would, and everyone has, taken a passage as a literal piece of narrative, Richards declares that it is metaphor, and where anyone would, and everyone has, taken one as metaphorical, Richards calls it a sober statement of fact. To treat the stories of

the empty tomb, juxtaposed as they are with the account of our Lord's death and burial, as an elaborate metaphor, and St. Paul's description of the Church as the body of Christ, juxtaposed as it is with other divergent, images, as intended literally, strikes me as preposterous: perversity could scarcely go any further.

To say that St. Paul's teaching that the Church is the body of Christ is metaphorically expressed is not to say that it is of minor importance: to deny that it is metaphorical because you think it important would be comparable with the vulgarism by which the word 'literally' is used only for emphasis, as in 'We were literally inundated by applications', etc. St. Paul is teaching that we can come to share in Christ's life only by becoming part of a society, a society in which each has a different role, some humble, some elevated, and that, if we are to be redeemed at all, it can only be by belonging to that society and playing our due part within it. It is that idea which, above all, differentiates Catholic from Protestant Christianity, and I am far from wishing to play it down. But it seems to me clear that it is a distortion of the whole Christian religion to attempt to make this particular idea bear the entire weight of the assertion that Christ has risen and still lives. We depend on Christ, not he on us. We can come to share in Christ's life only because, antecedently of our doing so, he is alive. It is not God's dispensation that baptism immediately converts each recipient into a perfect exemplar of Christ: we remain, even after admission to Christ's Church, spoiled and wounded creatures, and so the Church, viewed in its human reality, is a sadly imperfect image of Christ. Just look round at it for a moment, as it is now, this minute: or, if you prefer to say that it is the human community as a whole that is the body of Christ, look round at *that*. If it were only in the Church, still more if it were only in the entire human community, that Christ lives on after his death on the Cross, then we could only say that he does not live.

Huber Richards does *not* think that what the Gospels mean to communicate to us, by means of the Resurrection narratives, or what the apostles proclaimed in the first preaching, entailed that there did not remain in the tomb the dead body of Christ. Between the editor of *New Blackfriars* and his contributor, Fr. Kerr, there is a sharp opposition on this. Fr. McCabe says that the doctrine of the Resurrection unequivocally excludes the possibility that Jesus is dead like other men and that his bones lie buried in Palestine. Fr. Kerr, on the other hand, like Hubert Richards, firmly classes the stories about the empty tomb as among those that are 'graphic dramatisations of, and extended metaphors for, an essentially unrepresentable and absolutely unique event'. If Fr McCabe is right,

then what the apostles announced was something that unequivocally entailed that the tomb was empty. If that is so, then, if the tomb was *not* empty, their opponents had a very simple means available to refute and discredit them, namely to open the tomb and reveal the perhaps decomposing body of Jesus. So we can be sure of this: either the tomb was empty, and was generally known to be empty; or what the apostles originally preached in no way implied that it was empty. Fr. Kerr plainly opts for the latter alternative. For him, what the apostles originally announced was a series of experiences like that of St. Paul on the road to Damascus: visionary experiences of a personal encounter with their dead Master. St. Paul's experience, he remarks, 'convinced him ... without his ever having to visit the tomb'. It did, indeed: but what did it convince him of? There are two possible answers. Fr. Kerr's answer is that it convinced him of something perfectly compatible with Jesus' dead body still being in the tomb. The traditional answer is that it convinced him of something that excluded that. How, on this view, could he be convinced of such a thing without going to the tomb to see? What would make such a visit unnecessary would be that it was already acknowledged on all sides that the tomb was empty, that what was in dispute was not *whether* it was empty, but *why*—whether because, as the apostles claimed, Jesus had risen from the dead, or because, as they were accused of doing, they had stolen the body to perpetrate a fraud. In that case, St. Paul's experience might well have convinced him that the explanation he had hitherto rejected was the true one. His failure (so far as we know) to visit the tomb does not prove, as Fr. Kerr supposes, that he did not believe that it was empty. (Of course, if St. Luke had recorded that he *did* visit the tomb, and found it empty, that could have been interpreted as an 'extended metaphor': that is the delightful thing about this style of exegesis—you can have it both ways.)

If what the apostles were preaching was that (in any sense less stretched than that of being embodied in the human community) Jesus' bodily life had been restored, how could they have come by this amazing conviction, let alone persuaded others to accept it? Surely not solely by experiences of personal encounter, however authentic in character, which could just as well be interpreted as of a purely spiritual nature. It seems unthinkable that they should have arrived at such a staggering belief unless, as the Gospels record, their experiences themselves ruled out a merely spiritual appearance. It is all very well to appeal to St. Paul's vision that took place *after* the Resurrection had already been proclaimed, when the question was whether the apostles spoke the truth, or were deluded or mendacious; but, by itself, so far as we know, it would not have

suggested a restoration to Jesus of *bodily* life.

Would even encounters in which the disciples saw and touched their risen Lord have been enough? How could one tell what to think in the face of such an extraordinary event? The Gospel narratives do not tell us of a Jesus simply restored to life, like Lazarus brought out of the tomb and resuming his former existence. On the contrary, there were plenty of questions which the disciples are not described as asking or as having answers to, such as where Jesus was when not with them. But there are two questions to which the Gospels return plain answers, answers which they equally plainly represent the disciples as coming to accept. Was this a real body or a phantasm? Was it a reconstruction or copy of the body that had been nailed to the Cross and laid in the tomb, or that actual body itself, removed from the tomb? If one reads the Gospels ready to learn what they have to tell, not to impose a meaning of one's own, I do not see that one can suppose that their writers intended to convey anything but that it was a real body, and the same one that had been placed in the tomb. Nor can one read them as saying that the disciples were not at the time convinced by their experiences of these answers to the two questions, but on later reflection came to accept them. *After* such an experience, the passage of time can only make one more uncertain of its reality or its interpretation: unless the experience was at the time such as to compel these answers, they would never have been arrived at by subsequent rumination.

The experiences of encounter could convince the disciples of the answer to the first question: that they had seen a real living body and not a phantasm or wraith. But how could they, of themselves, answer the second one? How could they show that this was the body that had lain in the tomb, and not a copy? There is no probability in such matters: without some evidence one way or the other, one could only remain agnostic; Yet it is perfectly clear that the apostles had no doubt on this score: they did not preach that God had given Jesus another body, in place of the one that had been destroyed upon the Cross; they preached that God had raised up Jesus from the dead. How could they dare to announce such a claim, unless they were sure that it could not be refuted by a simple inspection of the tomb? How could they even suppose that they knew this, unless they knew that the body was not there where it had been laid? It is true enough that the accounts, in St. Paul and the four Gospels, of the Resurrection appearances are in some ways confusing and difficult to reconcile. But one thing that stands out from the Gospel accounts is the insistence on the empty tomb: nothing is more sharply emphasised; it, rather than any of the appearances even on Easter Day itself, stands out as *the* great event of

the third day. The four accounts of it come over as divergent narrations of a real event that made an overwhelming impact, and came to be seen as of central importance. Against this, Fr. Kerr can set only the fact that St. Paul does not explicitly mention the empty tomb in his epistles. Why should he? Neither in 1 Corinthians nor elsewhere was he preaching the Gospel for the first time: he was calling to mind what he had already delivered to those he addressed. When he includes in that the fact that Christ 'rose again the third day', to what does Fr. Kerr take him to be alluding? If the message was just that Jesus had become embodied in other men, or the like, then the third day does not come into it, save as the day on which the disciples learned that fact. But if the tomb was empty, then there was a time at which it was emptied: that was the time at which our Lord rose again, whereas, on any other hypothesis, it makes no sense to ask for any time save that of his death.

It was, says Fr. Kerr, 'a later generation ... who began to picture what the original disciples experienced and to dramatise it in the stories which ... finally took shape in the gospels of Luke and John'. This can be understood to mean that this later generation came to the conclusion that the sort of event narrated in those two Gospels was what must have happened. It can be allowed that we must be cautious about how much the evangelists are meaning to vouch for: but the very least, it seems to me, is that the disciples had encounters with the risen Christ of just this sort, even if the details of none of them are exactly as narrated. Suppose, if you will, that the evangelists did not have these actual stories, even at second or third hand, from the original disciples themselves; suppose that they invented them to illustrate the sort of thing that they had decided *must* have occurred; suppose that they never intended their readers to think that those very incidents had taken place, that they were originally understood to be saying no more than that that was the *kind* of thing that happened. Even so, if it was *not* the kind of thing that happened, then the Gospels are untruthful, however little their authors may have been intending to deceive.

Of course, a Catholic writer does not want to come out with a flat declaration that the Gospels are untruthful: so, instead of saying simply that evangelists belonging to a later generation gave a false account of what occurred, he may have recourse to talk about parables and extended metaphors. Now everyone can understand what it would be to tell a fictitious story about Jesus—a story intended to be understood as fiction—for the sake of some point that the author wished to make about him or about belief in him; and Fr. Kerr does a good job of showing how we should regard the Emmaus story if we took it as being in this mode. But the contention that all

the stories of the Resurrection appearances contained in the Gospels are told in this spirit and were originally intended to be so taken is simply incredible. The writers of the Gospels and of the Acts were perfectly familiar with the idea of a vision, as were their readers; and they knew perfectly well how to convey to a reader that what was being narrated was a vision. In the Resurrection stories, however, not only is there no indication that they are not meant to be taken quite literally; in several cases, the writers go out of their way to repudiate a non-literal interpretation. The evangelists must have known that their readers, however well instructed, would be eager to know more about just what happened after the death of Jesus: if all the stories that they told were meant to be understood only symbolically, would they not have given some clue to their intentions? Was there any literary convention on which they could rely to guard against a mistaken literalism? Could they have said to themselves, 'Well, now, any reader will know that, as soon as we come on to this sort of thing, everything will be invested with a purely symbolic meaning? On what basis could they have said this? What *is* the literary convention that is being assumed? To be sure, at this point in their narratives, they were talking about something quite outside the range of ordinary experience; but this goes without saying in any case. The reader's question would be: just how far outside ordinary experience, and in which direction? A reader without belief would not, indeed, accept the stories at all, either as literal or as metaphorical: but, given a reader who knew that there was something outside everyday experience to be accepted, on what convention could the evangelists rely to avoid the misinterpretation, on Fr. Kerr's reading, that these or similar events literally occurred? It is not just that there is no evidence of any such literary convention: it is that we cannot even formulate to ourselves what such a convention would have to be.

Any such convention would have had to be pretty definite, and pretty well known, if the evangelists were not to have been immediately misunderstood. There cannot be a convention that is followed only once: there would have had to be some parallels somewhere. What was this convention? We are not told. What evidence is there for its existence? We are given none. What ground is there for thinking that the Gospels were, at the start, interpreted in accordance with it, and only later misunderstood? We are offered none. That is not the spirit in which modern exegetes appeal to the principle of literary forms. On the contrary, the rule is: decide what you want to believe, and then announce the existence of a literary form according to which that is what your sources mean.

I hope that my confidence that I have not misinterpreted Fr.

Kerr is not misplaced; but I have much less confidence about interpreting Fr. McCabe. It is clear enough that he believes that the tomb was empty, and it would be surprising, therefore, if he did not also think that it was found empty, as the Gospels narrate. But, beyond that, I find myself in something of a fog. He is disposed to accept the view of Fr. Kerr that, in Fr. McCabe's word, 'the stories of the resurrection appearances are theological explorations of the positive meaning of the resurrection rather than straight historical records'; indeed, he refers to Fr. Kerr, not merely as proposing this, but as 'pointing it out', as if, once suggested, it could not be doubted. But as to why he thinks this, or what implications it has, I feel quite uncertain. He begins rightly as it seems to me, by distinguishing between resurrection and revival. This distinction is very clearly drawn in the Gospels themselves. There is no suggestion that Jairus's daughter, or the widow's son at Naim, did anything but resume their former ordinary earthly existence, eventually to die in the way of all mankind. But Jesus, having died, can die no more; and, having risen, he did not resume his former mode of existence. The disciples did not ask their risen Lord, 'Where are you staying? Where can we find you?' it is made plain that such questions would have been entirely inappropriate, and that they understood them to be so. We cannot easily understand, and we are not, in the New Testament, fully instructed about, Jesus' risen mode of existence: but it is plain, as Fr. McCabe very rightly observes, that we are being taught that 'the gospel of the resurrection is not that death is temporary but that the rule of death is overcome', that Jesus becomes one who is no longer ruled by death'.

That, however, can neither be the reason for, nor the consequence of, Fr. McCabe's denial that the stories of the Resurrection appearances are to be understood literally. It cannot be either, because it is something that is evident from those stories themselves, however literally interpreted. We must therefore seek elsewhere for Fr. McCabe's grounds for, or deductions from, the thesis which he shares with Fr. Kerr. Perhaps it lies in his assertion that 'the resurrection, like the eucharistic transformation and perhaps the creation, although it is dateable is not a change within time'. I confess that I find this remark totally obscure. That the *creation* is not a change within time is absolutely clear. But I find it baffling to understand what is meant by saying that any dateable event, whose date is later than some times and earlier than others, is not a change in time. It gives me no help, I am afraid, to be told that 'the resurrection is not itself ... a process within time, within history, rather it marks the mysterious unintelligible boundaries of history, the darkness beyond or within, which we know to be light'. Perhaps

Fr. McCabe is here struggling with a difficulty that arises over the Incarnation as much as over the Resurrection. In God, there is no change; such, at least, is the overwhelming testimony of Christian theological tradition. How, then, can it be said of God that He took flesh and was made man? Would that not imply that, before that astounding event, He had not yet been made man, and, after it, He had? Would that not be a change which God underwent, even though by His own will? God, it is answered, is not in time: for Him, there is no time before or after. I will not explore this answer here, nor, indeed, the question, since it is irrelevant. Sure enough, as soon as we advert to the fact that Jesus is God, and ask, of some event in which he was involved, whether this entailed a change in God, whether it means that, before that event, God was one thing, and after it, another, we shall run into this difficulty; and it is important to know how to resolve it. But that is beside the point for the interpretation of the Gospel narratives. For us, there is before and after; we live in time. and what happens to us, what happens in the world of which we are a part, is therefore in time. Whether or not it involved any change in God, Jesus was conceived of Mary, and that was an event in our world; and he was born of Mary, and that was also such an event; and he died upon the Cross, and that was another such event. No doubt there is some sense in which these events, just because they involve God directly, can be said to mark the mysterious unintelligible boundaries of history; whatever that sense is, it is not one that involves that those events cannot be narrated, that, as Fr. McCabe says of the Resurrection, to deal with them in *narrative* form is necessarily to use some kind of metaphorical language. The conclusion simply does not follow from the premise. One thing is blindingly obvious. None of the Gospels purports to describe the Resurrection itself: they do not say what happened in the tomb on Easter morning; they do not say in what state Jesus was after the event. They very carefully refrain from making any such assertions; they take the form solely of an account of what the women and the disciples saw and heard. They tell the reader of certain experiences that these people had; they draw no conclusions from them, but leave the reader to make what he can from them. 'The Lord has risen and has appeared to ...'—that is the only conclusion: but how it happened, and *what*, exactly, happened, that the Gospels do not pretend to tell us. Now those experiences were experiences of men and women, experiences that occurred in time. Possibly what those experiences testified to may be said to mark the boundaries of history: to determine that, we should have to talk more about what it was that they testified to and what it is for something to mark the boundaries of history.

Possibly, if one wanted to state just what they testified to, one would be forced to resort to metaphor; and we all know that there is metaphor in the New Testament, as when Jesus is described as at the right hand of God. But, from the fact that what is described are the experiences themselves, it in no way follows that the descriptions must be taken as metaphorical; and scarcely any case has been made that there is anything in the descriptions to indicate that that is how they are to be taken.

In interpreting the narrative parts of the New, or, indeed, the Old, Testament, there are always three distinct questions. What did the inspired writers suppose to have happened? What did they intend to convey had happened? And what really happened? An unbeliever is entitled to give three divergent answers to these questions, according to his estimate of the probabilities: the writers may have been mistaken; or they may have been fraudulent; or both. One who retains a belief in the inspiration of Scripture cannot give divergent answers: for him, all three questions must have the same answer, at least within the limits of what he supposes the writer to be wishing to vouch for. Because of that constraint, his estimate of probabilities is likely to differ from that of the unbeliever; he is nevertheless bound by the same requirements of plausibility as in any other matter. If he proposes an interpretation of some part of Scripture, it must be at least credible, by ordinary standards independent of faith, that the writer should have intended to be understood in that way, and that, at that time, he could reasonably expect his readers so to understand him. It may sometimes be less probable, to an unbeliever, that the writer should have intended that than that he should have had a different intention and have been in error or deliberately falsifying facts; but the proposed interpretation must at least be one which it would have some plausibility to suppose that he intended. This fundamental demand upon tolerable exegesis seems to me to have come to be totally ignored. The result is that what we are now being taught by those influenced by modern exegesis is beyond all credibility. Where, to accept the Christian faith as traditionally understood, we had to ascribe extraordinary events to the intervention of God, we are now asked to swallow ascriptions of intentions to human writers that violate every canon of human probability, or, indeed, rationality; and, of course, this is far more difficult to do. I have no idea whether those who offer such interpretations suppose that they are making faith easier; for myself, I can say only that, if I were to try to follow them, I should find it quite impossible.