

Elucidations

The Resurrection and Return of Jesus

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 9 October 1989

From: The Research Department

The Resurrection and Return of Jesus

In her letter dated ... to the Research Department, ... requests explanations of the Resurrection and return of Jesus. She has read the relevant interpretations in "Some Answered Questions" and "The Wine of Astonishment", yet feels that her understanding is not sufficient to satisfy her Christian friends. The Research Department provides the following.

The Resurrection of Jesus

...s Christian friends challenged the truth of Bahá'u'lláh by the following argument:

Where are Jesus Christ's remains compared to Bahá'u'lláh's? Christ was God, that is why his remains disappeared. Bahá'u'lláh's remains are still here so he can't be God.

...then summarizes the issue by asking, "Why did Christ's body disappear and Bahá'u'lláh's didn't?"

...s friends regard the Resurrection of Christ and His Ascension into heaven as physical events involving His physical body, whereas the Bahá'í writings explain that these accounts should be interpreted symbolically. The general issue of symbolism in the Bible is treated in great detail by Bahá'u'lláh in the "Kitáb-i-Şqán" and on page 49 of that book [rev. ed.], (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), Bahá'u'lláh explains the purpose of symbolism in all the Holy Books:

Know verily that the purpose underlying all these symbolic

terms and abstruse allusions, which emanate from the Revealers of God's holy Cause, hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world; that thereby the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts may be known from the perishable and barren soil. From time immemorial such hath been the way of God amidst His creatures, and to this testify the records of the sacred books.

In the days when the New Testament was written, and for many centuries thereafter, the accepted concept of creation was that the world in which we live was at the centre of the physical universe, hell was literally below the earth, while heaven was literally above the clouds, beyond the spheres of the planets. To the people of those times there was nothing absurd in a literal understanding of the "harrowing of hell" (Jesus's descent into hell to bring up the souls of the virtuous of past ages) or of His physical ascent into heaven.

At the time of Jesus the ideas of the people about the next life were very vague, whether they were Jews or pagans. Even though they may have thought of the next world as a physical location to which the spirit went, they conceived of the life there as a shadowy, unreal, pale reflection of reality. Jesus was able to teach them that the next life is as real as, indeed even more "real" than, this life; it is not surprising, therefore, that Christian tradition over the centuries should have "concretized" what were meant to be spiritual teachings.

Nowadays, when we have a clearer understanding of the nature of the physical universe, the idea of a physical body descending to the heart of the earth, or ascending beyond the stratosphere (except in a spaceship) is a ridiculous impossibility. The Bahá'í teachings make it clear, however, that even though we cannot accept these accounts as literally true, this does not lessen the truth or importance of the spiritual realities that they convey.

Moreover, if one reads the biblical accounts with an unbiased mind, one can see that the events related are far from typical of a physical body. It is true that Jesus tells doubting Thomas to feel His wounds to demonstrate that it was really He, but just before that He had suddenly appeared in a room with locked doors. In a similar manner, after speaking with two followers on the road to Emmaus, Jesus suddenly disappears. He also appears suddenly in different parts of the Holy Land, in Jerusalem, Galilee, and so forth.

In this context we must remember St. Paul's statement in I Corinthians 15:50-54:

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

From this it is clear that, even in Christian thought, it is the spiritual that is vital and eternal, not the material. The ways in which Christian theologians have interpreted and understood these teachings vary, but the essential elements are in accord both with Bahá'í teaching and with the accounts that we read in the New Testament.

In discussing these matters, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in "Some Answered Questions", rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), pp. 103-4, points out that Jesus states that He "came down from heaven", whereas it is known that from a physical point of view He was born as a baby in this material world. Thus His "descent" from "heaven" was a spiritual event, and "likewise His ascension to heaven is a spiritual and not material ascension".

Concerning the location of the burial site of Jesus' sacred remains, a letter dated 22 March 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer states:

Pilgrims have recorded in their notes oral statements made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi to the effect that the disciples hid the body of Christ by burying it under the wall of Jerusalem, and that it is now under the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The House of Justice knows of nothing in the Writings of the Faith, however, explicitly confirming these statements.

The Return of Jesus

...poses a second question: "Why did Christ explain His second coming with such detail in the book of Revelations if it were all symbolical?" The "Kitáb-i-Şqán" identifies Christ's

explanation concerning His return as symbolical and elucidates the meanings behind the symbolism. Regarding Christ's second coming, this subject is also explained in the "Kitáb-i-Şqán", and in chapters 26 and 33 of "Some Answered Questions", which deal with Christ's return and the subject of "return" in general.

A letter dated 29 November 1937 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer identifies the fulfilment of Christ's prophecy of His return -- of the coming of the Kingdom of the Father -- with the worldwide realization of the sovereignty of Bahá'u'lláh:

Now as regards the signs that would herald the advent of the new Manifestation; The Guardian wishes you to read over very carefully Bahá'u'lláh's explanation as recorded in the Şqán". There it is made clear that what is meant by the appearance of the Son of God after the calamitous events preceding His coming is the revelation of His full glory and its recognition and acceptance by the peoples of the world, and not His physical appearance. For Bahá'u'lláh, Whose advent marks the return of the Son in the glory of the Father, has already appeared, and the signs predicted in the Gospel have not yet fully been realized. Their complete fulfilment, however, would mark the beginning of the recognition of His full station by the peoples of the world. Then and only then will His appearance be made completely manifest.

Explaining the Bahá'í View to Christians

It is in the nature of such symbolic terms as "resurrection" and "return" that differing views concerning their meaning develop. Indeed, there are differences among Christian scholars themselves regarding the Resurrection of Christ, as the "Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions" (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1981) points out on page 619: "A number of Christian theologians today regard resurrection as a metaphor which expresses the conviction that the whole self has a future beyond death, but others reaffirm the importance of the traditional belief that Jesus' body was raised from death."

In light of the ongoing discussion within Christian theological circles, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to adduce a "proof" of the Bahá'í understanding of Christ's resurrection which would be acceptable to all Christians. The Research Department suggests that it would be

more fruitful to focus on such points of agreement as are outlined by the beloved Guardian on page 109 of "The Promised Day Is Come", rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980):

As to the position of Christianity, let it be stated without any hesitation or equivocation that its divine origin is unconditionally acknowledged, that the Son ship and Divinity of Jesus Christ are fearlessly asserted, that the divine inspiration of the Gospel is fully recognized, that the reality of the mystery of the Immaculacy of the Virgin Mary is confessed, and the primacy of Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, is upheld and defended....