

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

into the domain of conscience will surely reappear in some form or other. For the attitude of the state is ever liable to be determined by the (practical) negation of God, the negation, viz., of One infinitely superior to itself, Whose claims limit its own, Who rules and will rule in the kingdom of men.

RAYNER WINTERBOTHAM.

### *HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY AND THE MYSTICAL SENSE.*

THERE have always been in the Christan Church a certain number of people—necessarily a small minority, but a minority of the very best—who have based their belief in the Gospel, less on external testimony than on the inner witness of their spirit. They have held that where through moral effort the spiritual nature reaches a certain level of development, faculties are aroused which respond to the realities of the spiritual world as truly as our bodily senses respond to material things; and that just as the world of colour and sound would grow round the man born blind and deaf if those faculties in him could be awakened, so all Heaven grows round the man whose inner sense begins to respond to its wonderful and glorious vibrations.

If we place a gold coin in a closed wooden box the ordinary eye will, of course, see nothing but the wood, but under the X-rays the wood which before alone appeared real now seems only a shadow, while the coin invisible before is now seen as the only solid reality.

Let us imagine a number of people endowed with what we might call X-rays sight. They would move about among their fellow-men, yet they would be largely living in a different world. Their actions would seem strange to others

and their motives unintelligible. If one of them wrote about the things he saw his book would be as incomprehensible to the majority as the Gospel of St. John is to the majority of higher critics. Their opinions on the book would be chiefly useful as indicating the limitations of their own faculties.

In like manner, the things, which to the world seem real, were to the Christ only shadows, while the things which were real to Him were invisible to the world. "I stood," He says in the beautiful saying attributed to Him in the Logia, "in the midst of the world and in the flesh was I seen of them, and all men found I drunken and none found I athirst, and my soul grieveth over the sons of men because they are blind and see not."

Perhaps it was inevitable that even in the Christian Church the position of the mystic should be most persistently misunderstood. It is a mere matter of history that the prevailing attitude towards him on the part of the ecclesiastic has invariably been that of Balaam to his ass.

The conduct of the beast was to the Prophet incomprehensible. She turned aside from his way, she thrust his foot against a wall, she fell down under him, *because she saw and he did not*. The mystic has always been more or less beaten with the rod of ecclesiastical authority. "I would there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill thee," has often been the aspiration of Church conclaves. Yet Balaam was saved by his ass, as Christianity has been kept alive by mysticism.

It is obvious that it is only a minority who could truly say with the Apostle, "We look not on the things which are seen, but on the things which are not seen," and it is necessary in the economy of the Church that the majority, who cannot, as yet, so look on the world and life, should

not be neglected. The distinction between them and the provision which should be made for both is strongly and repeatedly emphasised by our Lord.

“To you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not given.”

“He that hath ears to hear let *him* hear.”

He provides for both classes ; knowledge of the mysteries for the developed few : parables for the undeveloped many. To both He reveals Himself according to their powers of seeing.

Man is like a house with two fronts. On one side of his being he faces the material world where all is perishable and transitory : on the other side he looks out on the world which is real and spiritual and eternal. It is of course from the latter that he must ultimately welcome the real approach of the Christ. But just because in the earlier stage of his development his consciousness is centred on that side which looks out on the phenomenal world of shadows, because to him at first that alone seems real, because he cannot yet hear Him who on the other side of his being—far within—stands at the door and knocks, the Eternal Christ projects Himself into human history and approaches him by the pathway of the bodily senses, and so we have what we call the historic Incarnation.

It is useful in this connexion to recall Plato's wonderful allegory of the Cave. He imagines some men chained so that their faces were always turned towards the inner wall of the cave and all they knew of the outer world was just what they saw of it in the shadows projected on that wall.

They themselves and all that they saw became identified in their minds with the shadows that they cast. The only world they knew was a world of two dimensions. To their stunted and impoverished minds it alone was real.

Then he imagines one of them escaping from his chains and learning to know the three-dimensional world in its reality and not only through its reflections on the wall. How could such a man, if he rejoined his companions, make clear to them the nature of the real world which he himself had come to know ?

That surely was just the problem of the Christ. Here was a world where the faces of men were turned fixedly toward the phenomenal and the unreal, and whose hearts were set on shadows. How could He bring them to turn and look the other way, to face the spiritual, to know the eternal and the true ?

He would approach them by the way of the senses. He would reveal Himself under conditions of time and space. He would project Himself into history. He would mingle with them in the shadow life of earth. He would win their confidence and love. He would tell them of the real world—His world—the Kingdom of God. He would speak to them of that He knew and testify of that He had seen. He would seek to wean their affections from earthly things and bid His nearest followers sell all that they had and follow Him homeless from place to place till His Presence became the one unchanging factor of their lives. *Then* He would tell them of approaching departure. He would say to them, “ A little while and ye behold Me no more ( ‘ with the wondering gaze of the bodily senses ’ ), and again a little while ( when the shock of the sense of loss is past—when you have turned your faces towards the world which is spiritual and real ) and then you shall *see* Me. Then you shall never lose Me more. . . . And now,” He would say, “ go back to your fellow-men and do for them what I have done for you. Hold before them my historic life ; teach them to know Me ‘ after the flesh ’ ; tell them about My world ; testify to them that ‘ the things which are seen are tem-

poral, and the things which are not seen are eternal.' Then they too will come to turn their backs on history—not repudiating it—not denying it—God forbid—why should they kick down the ladder by which they have climbed?—but transcending it, till they too will be able to say, 'If in the past we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more.'"

The historical bears a similar relation to the real that the map, say, of Scotland does to the country itself, with its mountains and valleys, its fields and its lochs. It is as true a representation as can be given on a piece of paper. It is accurate indeed but inadequate, suggestive, not final. We must look beyond it to that which it represents. Knowledge of the land itself may enable us to transcend its use, but it will never justify us in repudiating its accuracy or denying its practical value. Nay, may we not say that it can only be through knowledge of the original that we can ultimately be able to verify the accuracy of the map?

The Tabernacle which was the shadow of the heavenly things was glorious to every Hebrew but one, and that one was Moses, who had seen the heavenly realities of which it was but the dim reflection. None the less, and more than all the rest, Moses knew its value.

But it may be said, "Does not this imply that the historic life of Christ is merely a parable? To which we may answer, "Yes, it is God's parable, and *God's parables are written in history.*"

It is necessary to emphasise this point in view of what has been written by some modernists and by some exponents of "The New Theology." The Life of Christ is history, but it is not merely history and not mainly history. "To them that are without" indeed it is history only, for "to them all things are in parables," but to those whose faces are turned to the eternal it is the manifestation to the eyes of men of what is going on all the time.

Perhaps no one has drawn this distinction more powerfully or more beautifully than Browning in the words which he puts into the mouth of the aged and dying St. John in the great poem "A Death in the Desert."

"To me that story—ay, that Life and Death  
Of which I wrote 'it was,' to me, it is:  
—Is, here and now! I apprehend nought else.  
Is not God now in the world His power first made?  
Is not His love at issue still with sin,  
Visibly, when a wrong is done on earth?  
Love, wrong, and pain, what see I else around?  
Yea, and the Resurrection and uprising  
To the right hand of the Throne—

These are, I see:

But ye, the children, His beloved ones too.  
Ye need——"

And then he describes an optic glass he once wondered at by means of which things which to the unassisted eye appeared "lying confusedly insubordinate" became at once distinct and small and clear.

"Just thus ye needs must apprehend what truth  
I see, reduced to plain historic fact  
Diminished into clearness proved a point  
And far away: ye would withdraw your gaze  
From out Eternity, strain it upon time,  
Then stand before that fact, that Life and Death,  
Stay there at gaze, till it dispart, dispread,  
As though a star should open out, all sides,  
Grow the world on you, as it is my world."

The mystical deals with the real, the timeless, the eternal. The historical is the reflection of the real under conditions of time and space.

Now the value of this postulate is that it gives us a right in dealing with the Gospel history to take an *à priori* point of view. It makes intelligible our definite refusal to treat the story of the Life of Christ as mere ordinary history to be submitted unconditionally to the dissection of critics

with such facts and faculties as they can bring to bear upon it.

It has been truly said that "Nothing is less real than history." Merely historical events recede into the past and diminish in importance to us as the years go by. How far away, for instance, is the Boer War and the Battle of Colenso! "What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?" asks Hamlet. But the events of the Life of Christ never recede and never diminish in importance. And why? Because they are more than history. They are eternal truths made manifest in time.

You travel in a railway train by night. Houses flit by you and trees and villages. You see them for a moment, and then they are lost in the darkness behind. But the moon flies face to face with you all the way. It is as near you at the end of your journey as at the beginning. Again we ask why?

Because it is lifted up out of the Earth's sphere. So with the Cross of Calvary, so with the Resurrection of the Christ. They are as near to us to-day as to our forefathers a thousand years ago: they will be as near to our descendants a thousand years hence as they are to us.

"I," said Jesus, "if I be lifted up out of the earth (*ἐκ τῆς γῆς*) will draw all men unto Me."

The truths of which these events are the outward expression can be apprehended as really by the awakened intuitional faculty as the historical events themselves can be grasped by the human reason. Reason verifies what Faith sees, and common sense teaches us to approach the investigation rather to verify than to explore. Let us put this in the form of a fable.

An eagle and a mole once had an argument about what was happening a mile away. The eagle saw and bore witness; the mole travelled half a mile to investigate and died an unbeliever. The eagle having seen could not fail



to have an *à priori* opinion about what the investigation would reveal. This was denounced by the mole as being quite contrary to all the canons of impartial research.

Thus we claim for mysticism that it gives us a renewed hold upon the facts of the Life of Christ.

“O foolish men,” says Jesus to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Behoved it not the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?”

If they ought to have expected it before it happened it would seem to follow that something else beside historical criticism ought to have a say in the question whether it happened or not.

Reason is to Intuition what touch is to sight. We generally touch things with an *à priori* expectation at the back of our minds. Impartial investigation with the finger tips is a thing practically unknown. And yet how useful is the sense of touch!

“Is that a dagger that I see before me?” says Macbeth,  
 “The handle towards my hand, come let me clutch thee.  
 I have thee not and yet I see thee still.”

The sense of touch frees us from taking up our time with “daggers of the mind and false creations.”

Even such a help is the reason applied in criticism to the intuitions of faith. All the mystic claims is his right to see and to expect—the right—nay the duty of the Christian to adopt the standpoint enjoined by our Lord when He said, “Behoved it not the Christ to suffer these things?”

We grant at once the need of verification and the high utility of the critical sense. But verification is one thing and exploration is quite another. There is all the difference in the world between examining in the light and groping in the dark. Intuition is in most people an opening and

as yet untrained sense, and without verification it is not to be absolutely relied on ; but criticism without intuition, criticism which resolves to ignore the *à priori* point of view to which our Lord refers, *that* is hopeless blindness, and “ if the blind lead the blind ” where will they both end ?

When the spiritual faculties of the most developed men—the poets and the prophets of our race—reach a certain level they begin to see the eternal truths in great flashes of intuition, which flood the soul with light. Then they look for that timeless truth to be reflected in time. They look backward into history, and if they do not see it there, then forward into the future in the spirit of prophecy.

If I drop a coin on the floor I do not look to see *if* it is there. I know it is there and look to find it.

But it may be said “ that theory is all very well for those with mystical insight, but what about the majority ? ” Well let us frankly recognise the distinction and provide for both. That again is Bible teaching though strangely ignored.

“ We speak wisdom,” says St. Paul, “ among them that are perfect.” But he provides for the others too. He feeds the “ babes in Christ ” with milk.

That surely is the real significance of the distinction made by the risen Christ to St. Peter “ Feed my lambs ”—“ Feed my sheep.”

His standard of maturity was not a physical one.

Let us spend less time in trying to convince the reason of that which transcends it and spend more in developing the spiritual faculty by which alone it can be apprehended.

“ Spiritual things are spiritually discerned.” “ If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine.”

It is not faultless syllogisms that we need but awakened faculties. We have no quarrel with Biblical criticism, though we may sometimes feel that the primal curse on the serpent

lies somewhat heavily on those critics who, while possessing scholarship, lack insight.

If we may go back for a moment to what was said a little ago that reason with all its machinery of criticism and investigation is to intuition what touch is to sight, it will be plain that while we give pre-eminence to the latter we readily acknowledge the value of both. What we utterly condemn is the tacit assumption of some critics that our faith in historic Christianity depends on what they can find out from their old manuscripts.

It would be equally reasonable to claim that since optical illusions are possible all our knowledge of this world must be acquired through the finger tips.

Biblical criticism may brandish its results and its theories in the face of the ecclesiastic and frighten him out of his wits, but for the mystic it has no terrors. The anchor of his faith has never been grappled to merely external testimony, but—to use the great mixed metaphor of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews—“entereth into that which is within the veil” and beyond the senses and the reasoning of men.

Now if the events of the Life of Christ are the reflection in time and space of great eternal truths, then we can understand His own calm certainty that His every step was in the path marked out for Him, why He seemed to move according to a chart along an inevitable path, and why these events correspond with and appeal to the spiritual experience of the spiritual man in every age. In this spiritual correspondence we find the ultimate basis of belief.

The eternal truth that “Jesus Christ cometh (keeps on coming) in the flesh” is narrowed down through the “optic glass” of history to the Birth in Bethlehem, and finds its counterpart in the individual life of man when, in the words of St. Paul, “the Christ is formed” in him,

The age-long struggle of love with sin is expressed and manifested in the Cross of Calvary and reproduced in the individual experience of those who are "crucified with Christ."

And so we might watch Him pass from His Passion to the Resurrection "power of an endless life"—to His Ascension or withdrawal from the physical "that He might fill (or interpenetrate) all things" and so come nearer to all, and then think of Him as no longer chained to form, no longer external to us, but seeking entrance from within and manifesting Himself to us, and in us, and through us.

Thus the Life of Christ becomes clothed to us with new and living power. It is no longer mere ancient history, but the revelation of present and eternal truth.

"And warm, sweet, tender, even yet  
A present help is He;  
And Faith has still its Olivet  
And Love its Galilee."

H. ERSKINE HILL.

### *THE CAREFULNESS OF LUKE.*

#### II. PETER'S CONVERSION.

THE account of St. Peter's vision at Joppa (Acts x., xi.) has been treated by most commentators slightly and scantily. There are difficulties in regard to its position, besides greater difficulties in its exposition. On the one hand, it has hardly been placed in relation to its antecedents; on the other, we have so few materials for judging of its consequences, so far as the history of the Acts records them, that the critical nature of the turning-point in St. Peter's life marked by the vision is considerably obscured for us. We do not easily obtain the impression that the vision marks a kind of "conversion" in the Apostle. It seems to occur near the end of his active life.