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Demythologizing the Ascension -

A Reply to Professor Gooding

J.D.G. Dunn

The editor has kindly given me the opportunity of replying to Professor David Gooding's article on "Demythologizing Old and New, and Luke's Description of the Ascension: A Layman's Appraisal" (Irish Biblical Studies, Issue 2, April 1980, pp. 95-119). I do so with some hesitation, principally because the style chosen by Dr. Gooding is not very conducive to a fruitful discussion. He evidently sees himself in the role of Counsel for the Defence, called to defend Luke put in the dock by those he calls "the demythologizers". Apparently a charge has been brought against Luke (p112). Luke has been "caught out like a criminal" (p114) ! Such a style makes for easy reading but the cost is high. For it tends to sacrifice a painstaking accuracy in favour of a rhetoric which at times cannot refrain from playing to the gallery and indulging in a kind of "reductio per sarcasm". It tends to work with selective quotations, selected to provide material for polemic rather than to provide as dispassionate as possible a review of the evidence. And my clear impression on reading and re-reading Dr Gooding's article is that he has not managed to avoid such pitfalls.

May I therefore suggest a different style from that of the court room drama? If our endeavour is to understand the NT in its own terms, and Luke in particular, a closer analogy than that of the criminal in the dock is that of the person from another country whose language and culture and way of thinking are different from ours. He is trying to communicate with us (Professor Gooding and myself included), but because words in one language usually do not have the same range of meaning as their nearest translation equivalents, we the hearers have to question the speaker to try and ascertain what he means in our language. The procedure is not always easy since concepts in his language may have a whole background of culture and thought-world which is different from ours. So to understand his more profound statements we will have to become acquainted in some degree with that background. Dr. Gooding, Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, as much a professional as any of

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the biblical scholars he attacks (despite his modest disclaimer in the title to his article), will fully appreciate these problems of translation from one language to another. So I hope the analogy will be more acceptable all round.

My unhappiness with Dr. Gooding's procedure in his article focusses on two major issues. First, he has made no real attempt to expound or explain my position. His quotations are almost exclusively drawn from the last page and a bit of a seventeen-page article (excluding notes). And he proceeds by appending his reflections to often brief quotations - reflections which are his, and not exposition of what I said; on the contrary, they are often tangential and tendentious, miss the point, and give a misleading impression of what I was trying to say. This is precisely the fault that the Counsel for the Defence style can quickly slide into, so that the style is better avoided altogether.

Secondly, there is the much more serious failing, that Dr. Gooding makes little attempt to expound and explain the key passage (Acts 1. 9-11) within its historical context, but rather contents himself initially with an assumption as to Luke's meaning and latterly tries to press an interpretation on the passage which can hardly escape the charge of forcing a meaning that was never intended by the writer. Permit me then to do my own expounding and explaining on these points, in the hope thereby that I can clarify the discussion and the issue, and at the same time both answer Professor Gooding's charges and calm his fears.

## I

First, has Dr. Gooding appreciated what I was trying to say? The simplest way to proceed here is to restate my position and then to itemize some of the more serious misunderstandings or misrepresentations in Dr. Gooding's article. I trust that the spirit of Bultmann will not be grieved if I do not attempt to speak on his behalf too. For my views on Bultmann at this point I may simply refer to the original article which Dr. Gooding criticizes - "Demythologizing - the Problem of Myth in the NT, NT Interpretation, ed. I.H. Marshall, Paternoster Press 1977, pp285-307, particularly pp294-300. For the record I need simply say here that I do not share Bultmann's concept of this world

as a completely closed continuum of cause and affect, and I do affirm as a fundamental belief God's involvement in this world and particularly the incarnation of his word in Christ.

My basic complaint can be put this way: Dr. Gooding has pulled apart the two sides of what I see as a single process - the process of hermeneutics - the process whereby I in the twentieth century come to an understanding which is not merely an antiquarian's interest in long dead sentiments of a past civilization, but an understanding which is open to God speaking his word afresh to me in the twentieth century through these same words of the first century.

How am I to do this? By recognizing that there are two poles to the hermeneutical process, two foci round which the hermeneutical ellipse swings (it is more complicated than this analogy suggests, but I am not writing a book about it at this point). What do I mean? The two poles, the two foci are the NT itself and myself. Let me comment on them separately and briefly.

(a) The NT itself. The NT is a given. Its text is as near an original as we need. That is to say, we actually have the words that were written by the first evangelists and apostles. These are our only first hand witness to the revelation of God in Christ in the first century - in the Christ-event, that is, in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. For me therefore they constitute the only real source material for our reconstruction and understanding of the Christ-event. They define for me (I speak only for myself for the time being) what the Christ-event was and what Christianity was in the beginning. They therefore serve as an indispensable norm, an authoritative canon if you like, by which I must evaluate all other characterizations of Christianity, all other interpretations of the Christ-event (such as we find, for example, in the numerous biographies of Jesus which litter the history of the past two centuries). These inspired writings provide a yardstick by which I can test all subsequent definitions of Christianity. Whatever further conclusions I come to when I investigate the NT more closely this definitive, authoritative, normative character of the NT remains constant.

(b) Me myself. No man comes to the NT with precisely the same background, with precisely the same intellectual make-up, with precisely the same questions. Of course there will be

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a large measure of overlap between different people's questions. But when I bring my question to the NT I hope to hear an answer for my question, not for the other man's. This remains true whatever the question - whether it is, "What must I do to be saved?", or "What should I believe about God?" or "What relevance has Jesus' word about turning the other cheek to me now?", or "What should I do, what is right for me in this situation?", or whatever. Subjective? Yes, but only in the sense that I believe God still deals directly with the individual and has regard to the uniqueness of that individual's personality and gifts and circumstances.

The hermeneutical process then is the bringing of these two poles/foci into interaction. The first thing to do at any point of inquiry into the NT is to find out what it means, what the original author intended his original readers to hear. That is a matter of exegesis, of explorations into the grammatical and historical context. The meaning will by no means be always self-evident. Indeed it will often be open to diverse interpretations. But always we have the givenness of the text itself to direct us, to serve as a check and norm for our interpretation. At the same time we should be aware of the fact that the texts which we hear most clearly, the interpretations which speak to us most directly, will be in part determined by the second focus (me myself) - by the stage I have reached in my pilgrimage of life, by my particular circumstances at that stage, and so on. And at once we realize that even in trying to inquire into the focus of the NT itself, the hermeneutical ellipse has begun already to swing round both foci. In other words, this hermeneutical ellipse is another way of describing the conversation with the foreigner who tries to speak to us across the barrier of diverse language and culture (the analogy suggested above on pxx). Or alternatively, this hermeneutical ellipse is what we mean by demythologizing - the translation of the language of the NT into the language of today while remaining as faithful as possible to the original meaning of the NT writers.

I would have hoped that all this was sufficiently clear from what I said on p300f of the original article. Unfortunately Dr Gooding has missed the balance and thrust of my words on more than one occasion, and to set the record straight I may be permitted to demonstrate this.

(1) On p301 I wrote

"The point is that each must tackle the problem for himself and no one else can tackle it for him; for in the end of the day it is the problem of how I express my faith as a Christian. The more one regards the Christ-event and the faith of the first Christians as normative, the more tightly one is bound to the expressions of the faith and hope of these first Christians as the starting-point for the elucidation and interpretation of one's own self-understanding and experience of grace."

Here I was drawing attention in the two sentences to the two poles of the hermeneutical process. First the second pole, me myself. Second, the first pole, the NT itself. Dr Gooding pulls the two sentences apart (on the principle presumably of "divide and destroy"). The first he evidently takes as inviting what he later calls the "chaos of subjective relativism" (p103), where everyone can believe what he likes, so long as he believes it (p100). That, I have to stress, is entirely Dr Gooding's interpretation of what I said - it is certainly not what I meant. I was simply saying that Christian faith must be my faith as a Christian, and not merely something I believe Paul or John believed nineteen centuries ago. This I think is sufficiently evident when the sentence is read as following on from its preceding context.

The second sentence Dr Gooding takes in an even more extraordinary way. Having quoted it in isolation from its preceding sentence, he comments, "So then, not the NT (which may or may not be normative), but one's own self-understanding and experience of grace are the chief things to be interpreted" (p101). Notice the posing as an antithesis what was never intended as such - "not the NT....but one's own self-understanding" - the voice of the Counsel for the Defence, but hardly of the exegete. My purpose in the second sentence was to rule out precisely the interpretation which Dr Gooding was pleased to draw from the first! My point is to stress the role of the NT as norm in this hermeneutical process, that I must judge whether and how I have heard God speak to me by the norm of the Christ-event. By breaking up my line of argument he has missed my point and made me argue against myself! - clever advocacy, perhaps, but hardly advancing the cause of truth.

(2) On p102 Dr Gooding gives an extended quotation of the

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final half paragraph of my essay - too long to repeat here. In it I stressed the dialectic or dialogic nature of the hermeneutical process and emphasized (a) that it was not only a two-way process - other Christians, other ecclesiastical traditions are engaged in the same hermeneutical process, and they must be listened to as well, otherwise my appreciation of the body of Christ is defective; and (b) that the hermeneutical process never finishes - the faith never reaches a final form that can remain fixed and unalterable from one generation, one century to the next. We have a fixed definition and norm in the NT, but all subsequent formulations must remain tentative and provisional - for here we have no permanent city. To be a living faith it can not simply be a repetition of John's words or Augustine's words or Luther's words in unaltered form; it must be an expression of faith now, a faith that is faithful to the first faith but a re-expression of it, reminted in the fire of the ever new experience of God's grace now.

Such was my concern, which unfortunately Professor Gooding can only parody by likening it to the "myths and endless genealogies" which simply "minister questionings" ( I Tim 1.4 AV; "promote speculations" RSV). When I speak of repeated questions I think of my being put in question by the NT, so that I must respond to this word from God if I am to maintain any integrity and peace of mind. I think of questions which seek to clarify the NT's answer to the earliest question, which seek an ever-deeper insight into the reality of faith then, the meaning of the original revelation. I think of questions that follow from answers, further questions, questions of the form, "Well, then, if that is the case, what about....? If that is the case how should I.....?" Such questioning can be interpreted (unkindly) as the endless round of speculation. That was not at all how I intended it. Such a dialogue is for me simply the character of the faith which is growing and maturing as it responds ever anew to the word of God.

(3) On pages 103f. the misrepresentation becomes more serious. Professor Gooding states as a matter of fact that "Dr Dunn does not believe that in the NT we have God's Word. He believes that what we have here is simply "the faith of the first Christians" (p301)...The Christ-event is no more than the expression of the faith of the first Christians." Here I am afraid I became rather angry - there is

more than a hint of character assassination in this accusation. Please notice how the phrase "the faith of the first Christians" is introduced. The word "simply" has been conjured out of thin air. My assertion of the normativeness of the Christ-event and of the faith of the first Christians (quoted above pxx) has become for Dr Gooding an assertion that I believe the NT to be simply the faith of the first Christians, that I believe the Christ-event to be no more than the expression of the faith of the first Christians. Where does Dr Gooding derive such information from? He does not tell us. And it certainly did not come from the original "Demythologizing" article. In a court room I fear the judge would have to rebuke Counsel for the Defence for such a breach in courtesy, to put it no more highly. Let me assure Dr Gooding that despite his confident and unfounded opinion I do believe "that in the NT we have God's Word", that in the NT we have the words (though not all the words) through which God spoke to the first Christians, and that in the article he finds so distasteful my concern was that the Christians today might still hear God's voice speaking through these same words, not just the words of Paul to the Romans, but the word of God still speaking through Paul.

(4) I suppose I should not be surprised when Dr Gooding goes on to caricature my thesis in Unity and Diversity in the New Testament (SCM Press, 1977): "Dr Dunn tells us that the faith of the first Christians, while possessing a common core, is for the rest a mass of mutually incompatible ideas ..." (p104, my underlining). Please note that this time there are no quotation marks round the key phrase. Once again Dr Gooding has exaggerated something I said ( a whole book this time) into something I cannot recognize as an opinion of mine. Again for the record let me simply stress that the main emphasis of that book is given in the title - unity and diversity - both words to be given emphasis. The diversity of faith includes disagreements on detail and on points of emphasis, and even some incompatibility when the two statements in question are abstracted from their historical situations. But to characterize the diversity side of my thesis as postulating "a mass of mutually incompatible ideas" is to resort to a level of misrepresentation which I would not have been surprised to find in the propaganda of National Socialism or Soviet Communism but hardly expected to find in the writing of a fellow-Christian.



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I could take up several other points, but I weary of discussion at this level, and hopefully I have said enough to indicate that Dr Gooding has indeed misread me, that his criticism of my earlier "Demythologizing" article is largely misdirected, and that the logic of his "exposition" is the logic of his own polemic and not of anything I wrote. So I shall turn at once to my second complaint.

## II

Secondly, for the bulk of the article Dr Gooding simply ignores the fact that Luke's account of the ascension needs to be interpreted. It is not entirely self-evident what he means. Dr Gooding in fact acknowledges this when at last he turns to the question of how we are to understand Luke's account - on pp114f. (the article's twentieth page!). Yet much of his rebuke of "the demythologizers" prior to that has simply assumed that Luke's meaning is clear and that "the demythologizers" are being somewhat perverse in their response to it:

"Well, if people do not believe that there exists a heaven in the sense in which John, Luke, Paul and the rest of the NT speak of it, and in which according to them all Christ spoke of it, then we must accept their statement: they do not believe. Let the matter rest there" (p108).

But in what sense did they speak of heaven? That is the question which must first be asked before the serious accusations of unfaith are brought forth. In particular, what was Luke's view of heaven and of the ascension?

The only way to go about answering this question is to let Luke speak for himself - the device of quoting phrases or clauses within an explanatory elaboration superimposes an interpretation on the text and confuses the original text with the interpretation in the eye of the reader - good Counsel for the Defence tactics but not good exegesis.

The whole uninterrupted passage in Acts is as follows (Acts 1.9-11 RSV):

9. As they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw him go into heaven".

How does Luke think of heaven and of the final parting of Jesus from his disciples? The most obvious understanding, I submit, is that he thought of Jesus going up into heaven. Professor Gooding interprets v9 as embracing a two stage journey to heaven (p114) - first, the "literal, physical ascent into the air; and that part of the journey they saw"; second, a stage which Luke himself tells us they did not see: "a cloud received him out of their sight." "What happened then", he continues, "and how the passage from our world to the other world was effected, Luke does not attempt to describe, or even claim to know" (p114). Unfortunately he ignores v11, where the angels describe what has happened as Jesus "being taken up from you into heaven". The idea of a two stage journey, only the second stage of which involved the entry into heaven, is hardly Luke's. It is Dr Gooding's own - his interpretation superimposed upon the text. Whereas the most obvious reading of Acts is that Luke thought in terms of an ascension, a going up into heaven.

Why has Dr Gooding pressed this interpretation upon Acts? The answer again is clear. For the simple reason that Luke seems to think of heaven as up there and of the ascension of Jesus as a literal going up to a place literally above them, from which he will subsequently appear - on clouds. The same sort of portrayal, in fact, as we find in I Thess.4. 16-17:

"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord."

What Dr Gooding does not like to accept is that Luke thought of heaven as a place beyond man's sight high in the

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sky - as we today would say, a three-dimensional entity within the time-space complex. Hence the learned but brief reference on p113 to the "several cosmologies current in the first century AD" ("as we all know" - hear again the wooing tones of the Counsel for the Defence). But that is nothing more than a carefully selected handful of dust to throw in the jury's eyes. The true exegete will want to see a much fuller picture of the ancient cosmologies - particularly the cosmologies of the Judeo-Christian tradition. A brief response to Dr Gooding is not the place for such an extensive survey. But fortunately there are various dictionary and encyclopedia articles which have done it for us. So let me simply refer for example to the article on "Heaven" by H. Bietenhard in The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, ed. C. Brown, Paternoster Press, Vol.2, 1976, pp188-196, also pp205-210.

Bietenhard shows that the Judeo-Christian cosmology reflected in the Bible seems to consist of variations of the basic idea of what can be called "the cosmic building" - the underworld below, the earth in the middle, the heaven above (cf. Ex.20.4; Ps.115.15-17). God has made the "upper storey" his dwelling place (Deut.26.15; Ps.104.3; Amos 9.6); he sits enthroned in heaven (e.g. 1 Kings 22.19; Ps.82.1; Dan.7.9-14), and rides on clouds through his domain (Deut. 33.26; Isa 19.1). Particularly interesting are the passages which seem to envisage a plurality of heavens (Deut.10.14; 1 Kings 8.27; Ps.148.4). This way of visualizing the larger wholeness of the cosmos seems to have become increasingly popular as we enter the NT era, and there were various speculations as to how many heavens there actually were. Some thought in terms of only one (1 Enoch, IV Ezra). Others of three or five heavens (Testament of Levi). Others of seven heavens (Testament of Abraham, Ascension of Isaiah, rabbinic tradition). The NT writings belong in this context and make most sense when read against this background. So we are not surprised at the frequency with which the NT writers speak of the "heavens" (plural), including several passages which speak of Christ's ascension as an ascending "into", "above" or "through" the heavens (Acts 2.34; Eph.4. 10; Heb.4.14; 7.26). Nor are we surprised that Paul thinks in terms of at least three heavens, with paradise identified as the third heaven (II Cor. 12.2-3)

Within this context, I submit, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Luke, in describing Christ's final departure from his disciples after his resurrection, thought of it as an ascension (in the straightforward meaning of the word), a rising up into the heaven or heavens to sit at God's right hand (cf. Acts 2.33-4; 7.55-6). This is not an accusation against Luke, as though he had knowingly and criminally distorted the true picture of reality. It is simply a matter of recognizing that such a way of understanding reality was typical of the ancient world. We today have a fuller picture of the universe. We know that beyond what is visible to the naked eye there are galaxies and the vastness of space. We cannot think of a series of heavens suspended above the earth and of God enthroned in the highest heaven. But ancient man could, and evidently did. Not unnaturally - how better to depict the majesty of God as high and lifted up far beyond the range of puny man's eyesight and strength? That was their way, we may say, of affirming that God is beyond the limits of man's perception and power. The only difference between them and us is that we recognize that such an affirmation can no longer be described in three-dimensional terms of the time-space complex. So that when we use such language, not least the talk of ascension, we do so in a consciously metaphorical way - whereas they could use it literally. But that is simply to say we "demythologize".

In point of fact Dr Gooding does precisely the same thing when earlier in the article he claims that "millions of Christians all down the centuries" have understood "that besides our visible universe there is another world, normally invisible to us, in which the presence of God is experienced immediately" and have taken that to be the NT's understanding of "heaven" (p104f). Whether he likes it or not, Dr Gooding is in fact attributing to these millions of Christians a kind of "demythologizing". Indeed, the most ironical point of Dr Gooding's claim here is that he is doing more or less what Bultmann invited us to do - to interpret ancient man's talk of heaven in the language of a this-worldly objectivity as "imagery to express the other-worldly" ("New Testament and Mythology", p10, N.2). How this squares with his opening charge that "when they (the demythologizers etc) talk of the Ascension they are by no means talking of the same thing as Luke" (p95) is perhaps something that I should leave to Dr

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Gooding to answer for himself.

And so we return to the heart of the issue. We can pose it thus: (1) Did Luke think of heaven as a place above the earth, and so of the ascension as a literal going up to heaven? (2) If so, what does that mean for our belief in the ascension? The answer to the first question can only be resolved by exegesis, and the most probable answer given by exegesis, as we have seen, is Yes. Well then, where does that leave us? (Note the dialogue of question, answer, question, .....). Are we bound to this understanding and conceptualizing of the ascension? In the paragraph quoted above on pxx Dr Gooding would seem to demand just that. But then his rather forced exegesis of Acts 1. 9-11 (distinguishing the "going up" from the "to heaven" - above pxx) shows that he does not want us to be bound to such a conceptuality. For Dr Gooding is as much a man of the twentieth century as I am at this point, and would find the remark attributed to the first Soviet cosmonaut, "I didn't see any God up there", just as ludicrous as I do. He solves the problem by denying the most obvious meaning of the passage in Acts. The alternative is to recognize that Luke's conceptualizing of the ascension does pose something of a problem to us - the problem of translating not just Luke's words but also his conceptuality into a modern idiom appropriate to (though not wholly determined by) our advancing scientific knowledge. Then Luke's "ascension" (in physical terms) beyond the eye of mortal man becomes a "passage from our world to the other world" (in Dr Gooding's language, p114), where the continuities and discontinuities between "our world" and "the other world" have to be explained in much more subtle terms than ever Luke (or Jesus or Paul or John) found it necessary to strive for.

Paradoxically the results of the two ways of handling the problem (Dr Gooding's and mine) are not so very different. It is the methods that differ. Dr Gooding has to deny the **most obvious** meaning of Luke's writing: he has to construct an exegesis which in effect denies that Luke was a man of his own time; he has to depict him as in effect sensitive to the sensibilities of a believer in the scientific age. And all because this word "demythologizing" evokes for him nightmares of rampant subjectivism. The better way, I submit, is to recognize the conceptuality of Luke expressed in his account of the ascension, to recognize that it is a

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conceptuality we cannot share, and to translate it into a conceptuality more capable of conveying Luke's meaning to today. If "demythologize" is a word which sets off bad vibrations, then let us abandon it by all means and talk instead of translating beliefs which use an outdated conceptuality into a different conceptuality. But it comes to the same thing.

In short, if Dr Gooding asks me whether I believe that Jesus ascended to heaven in the way that Luke meant when he wrote Acts 1.9-11, I have to answer No. And, I may add, I have more than half a suspicion that Dr Gooding's answer is actually the same. But if Dr Gooding asks me whether I believe that Jesus "ascended to heaven", my answer is Yes. That is the "reality of faith" which Luke expressed in the conceptuality of his own time. That is the reality of faith which we today have to re-express in conceptuality appropriate to our time.

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