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DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE ASCENSION -

A reply by D. W. Gooding

The editor has suggested that I might care to comment on Dr. Dunn's reply to my original criticism of his article "Demythologizing - The Problem of Myth in the New Testament", New Testament Interpretation, Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1977, 285-307 (hereafter NTI); and I gladly do so.

My first comment is sincerely to ask Dr. Dunn's pardon for anything in which I have misrepresented him. I had, of course, no intention of misrepresenting him or of attacking his scholarship, and still less of attacking his character. It was with his views and their logical implications that I was concerned. If and where I have misrepresented them, I am glad to have him correct me; and indeed, if I still misunderstand and misrepresent them, to have him correct me still further.

The vigour of my attack on his views was caused by the fact that his chapter in NTI denies by implication Luke's historical veracity; and now his 'Reply' repeats and makes explicit that denial. Luke's words in Acts I: 9-11, "... houtōs eleusetai hon tropon etheasasthe poreuomenon ...", leave no doubt that he intended not merely to assert the fact that Christ has ascended, but to describe the manner of the Ascension, and further to assert that the Apostles saw Christ ascend in this manner. Dr. Dunn rejects Luke's intended meaning as untrue: "If Professor Gooding asks me whether I believe that Jesus ascended to heaven in the way that Luke meant when he wrote Acts I : 9-11, I have to answer No." (Reply p. 27). By this denial, then, he denies that that happened which Luke says did happen, and that the Apostles saw what Luke says they saw; and this denial in turn inevitably leads him on to deny the reliability (as, perhaps, also the fact) of the angels' words about the manner of the Parousia, and similarly of our Lord's words on the same topic (Matt. 26 : 64) and of those of the Apostles

(I Thess. 4 : 16-17; Rev. 1 : 7): see NTI p. 300;
Reply p. 23f

Now, in my understanding of things, to deny the veracity and historical reliability of what Luke has reported (to say nothing about denying the accuracy and credibility of Christ's prophecy) is to lay a charge against Luke the seriousness of which is in no way diminished by Dr. Dunn's disclaimer that he is not making an accusation against Luke (Reply p. 25). The question at issue is: did that happen which Luke says happened? Did Christ lead the Apostles out to Bethany (Luke 24 : 50-51)? Was he there parted from them? Did they see him rise? Did angels appear and comment to them on the manner of the Going and of the Coming Again? If these things did not happen, and happen as Luke says they happened, there is no way that Luke can be relieved of the charge that he has told us an untruth. Whether he has done so unintentionally, passing on a story from the Apostles thinking it to be true when it was not, or intentionally, inventing a story and passing it off as historically and factually true when he knew it was not, this may affect his claim to innocence or guilt; but it cannot alter the fact that his record is not true - if the events he records did not happen, or happen as he says they happened. The only ground on which Luke could be relieved of the charge that he has told untruths would be that he never intended his record of the manner of the Ascension to be taken as the faithful reporting of an eyewitness account of a literal historical event, but had in fact taken pains (like Plato did when he told myths) to tell his reader that his story was mythical, invented to describe how Luke thought the Ascension may have taken place, or else invented to express Luke's faith in some theological doctrine (or theory) called, for convenience, the 'Ascension'. But the very opposite is the case, as Luke himself tells us. He claims that he is recording the tekmeria (1 : 3), the compelling evidence by which the Risen Christ demonstrated to the Apostles that he had risen from the dead. That evidence

consisted, as he tells us in his Gospel and in the Acts, of a succession of appearances, in the course of which he ate very literal fish, walked very literal roads, and, assembling with his Apostles, expounded Scripture and briefed them on their mission. According to Luke the leading out to Bethany and the Ascension were but the culmination of the final appearing, the final tekmerion. If these tekmeria, then, are fictions, they they have no value as tekmeria at all, and Luke's record of them fails of its declared purpose. What is worse, if while claiming to give us tekmeria he has in fact told us untruths unworthy of belief, then Luke must be charged with misrepresentation.

Here, then, in passing let me confess that I am genuinely perplexed by the way theologians have of publishing theories which imply that our Lord and his Apostles have told untruths, and then of adding blandly that, of course, they mean no offence, and are not making anything worth calling an accusation. I fancy those same theologians would be distinctly upset to be told that they themselves had told untruths.

But to return. I now see from Dr. Dunn's express statement in his Reply (p. 20) that I was wrong to deduce from NTI and his other writings that he does not believe the NT or Luke's account of the Ascension to be the Word of God. Again I apologise. And not only so: I am delighted to be proved wrong. On the other hand, when he first declares that he believes Luke's account of the Ascension to be the Word of God, and then adds that, nevertheless, he does not believe its intended meaning, I am frankly at a loss to know what the declaration amounts to.

His attempt to justify his hermeneutic at this point by appeal to an analogy with the principle of translation, seems to me, I must say, quite inadequate. The analogy is not true. While I am not a professional theologian (and I ask Dr. Dunn to believe the fact, and

my sincerity in reporting it, that in theology I am but a lay-man), I am a professional classicist; and for years I have, along with fellow-classicists, taught students to penetrate behind idiom and metaphor to an author's intended meaning, and to translate that intended meaning into the receptor language. But that is not what his hermeneutic does with Luke's account of the Ascension. He is himself witness that Luke is not merely using metaphor (NTI 300). He intends to tell us that Christ literally and historically led the Apostles out to Bethany, literally was parted from them, and that the Apostles saw him rise bodily from them. This intended meaning Dr. Dunn does not translate: he denies it. He adds that, of course, he believes in the Ascension. But, then, so did Luke. Here in the last chapter of his Gospel and in Acts 1, however, Luke is not simply confessing his faith in the fact that Christ has ascended: his intention is to tell us how it happened, as far as human eyes could see it. And this Dr. Dunn says he does not believe. If at this point he has some hermeneutic that allows him to reject Luke's intended meaning and substitute a different meaning which he did not intend, then it seems to me that this hermeneutic is doing the very opposite of what true translation should aim at.

And that brings me to his contention that I have completely misrepresented his "hermeneutical ellipse", by alleging that it presents us with nothing but subjectivism. About the one "focus", as he calls it, namely our understanding of what is written, I need not speak: I agree with him that here subjectivism necessarily enters in. The question is about the nature of the other "focus", which in this context is Luke's account of the manner of the Ascension. And here we must ask, Is Luke's account of the Ascension faithful, objective reporting of an event which the Apostles saw take place before their very eyes? If I have understood him rightly, he denies, in fact, that it could possibly be. (At least, that is what he seems to me to be saying.

Maybe here too I am mistaken. I hope I am. Maybe he in fact believes that Christ did literally lead the Apostles out to Bethany, that he did rise up before them, that the angels did appear and speak, and that the only thing he cannot believe is that Christ passed from this world into heaven simply by thus rising up. But I fear that he means that Luke's whole description of the Ascension derives not from the Apostles' report of what they saw happen, but from 'a first century cosmology which is impossible to us' (NTI 300).). So then, if Luke's account is not the objective reporting of an event witnessed by the Apostles, as Luke intended it to be, and imagined it to be, what is it? We need to know its status, since of the two foci this is the one that it supposed to be objective, which we must then interpret (necessarily subjectively) at the other focus. Later in NTI (301) Dr. Dunn seems to describe it as an expression of Luke's faith. But in what sense 'his faith'? Was it not a part of his faith that the Ascension took place in the manner in which he describes it? (Dr. Dunn himself admits that Luke intended his description literally.) But if, as Dr. Dunn maintains, the Ascension did not take place as Luke believed and says it did, then all we have in Luke's description is a highly subjective, imaginative and false reconstruction of the event. To that extent it is a fiction. Now while the existence of Luke's fictional story is for us an objective fact, the fictional story itself cannot be accorded the status of objective reporting of an historical event. It is and remains Luke's subjective creation. Both the foci, then, turn out to be subjective.

Dr. Dunn maintains, I know, that behind Luke's fiction there was 'the reality of the love and faith and hope' (NTI 301) which Luke's subjective fiction was designed to express; but then on that same page he tells us (understandably on his hermeneutical presuppositions) that determining what that reality was is a something that each must do for himself. It is clearly a completely subjective matter. If I have no access to that

part of the Christ-event which was the manner in which the incarnate, resurrected Christ left our world except through Luke's subjective fiction, where shall I find anything objective as the starting point and basis for my (necessarily subjective) interpretation? I cannot see, therefore, how his theory of a hermeneutical ellipse with its two foci delivers his interpretational practice from complete subjectivism.

Dr. Dunn suggests that in commenting upon Luke's account of the Ascension I have by a forced exegesis 'denied the most obvious meaning of the passage in Acts' (Reply p.26) and superimposed my own interpretation on the text (Reply p.23). Needless to say, I had no intention of doing this. Luke himself says that a cloud received the ascending Christ from the Apostles' sight; and I did not suppose - and still do not suppose - that Luke intends to affirm by anything else he says that the Apostles did actually see what happened after the cloud received Christ from their sight. If, however, my interpretation is false, I withdraw it, and reaffirm that I believe that the Apostles literally saw happen everything that Luke says they saw, in the manner and extent in which Luke says they saw it.

Dr. Dunn suggests also that my interpretation of Luke's description of the Ascension is unsound because I have not employed the true historico-critical method and compared Luke's description with the speculations of various contemporary, and near-contemporary writers. My answer is that I would count it sounder method to compare what Luke says with what the Writer to the Hebrews says. The latter has the advantage of being both contemporary and the author of an inspired canonical text. He first tells us that the "more perfect tabernacle" into which Christ has entered is not made with hands, i.e. it is of supernatural origin; and then he further defines it as "not of this creation" (9 : 11). He also tells us that in leaving our world and entering heaven Christ has passed through a 'veil' (6 : 19). The nature of that 'veil', he does not, of course, tell us;

but it is unlikely (from the OT analogy which he is using) that he thought of it as mere distance in space, and certain that he did not think of the journey from earth into God's heaven as one uninterrupted continuum. If, then, the Writer to the Hebrews shows himself aware that the heaven into which Christ has entered is not of this creation, we have no sound reason for asserting that Luke must have believed it was.

As for the fact that the Biblical writers believed in a hierarchy of created worlds beyond our own, what scientific cosmology has proved them wrong? Dr. Dunn appeals to scientific cosmology as the cause and justification of his disbelief in Luke's account of the manner of the Ascension. But what cosmology contradicts is his interpretation of, and deductions from, Luke's account, not Luke's account itself. Luke does not say, and is not fairly taken to imply, that the heaven into which Christ passed is a part of this creation such that if only an astronaut went far enough he could prove that it was not in fact there. Dr. Dunn claims that his interpretation is most natural one, a conclusion difficult to avoid (Reply p. 25). But it is only natural for those who first find it acceptable to suppose that under the guise of recording an eyewitness account of how the Ascension took place Luke is in fact giving us an imaginary, and to us unacceptable, account of how he thought the Ascension may have taken place. The implications of that supposition are immense. If on cosmological grounds Luke cannot be believed when he says that the Apostles saw Christ rise from Bethany, can he be believed when he reports the no less miraculous stories that the Christ who had been crucified and buried led the Apostles out to Bethany, ate with them in the Upper Room, walked the road to Emmaus, left the tomb?

Nor is Dr. Dunn's conclusion difficult to avoid. He reaches it because he insists that the angels' words that the Apostles saw Jesus going into heaven must mean that Luke held cosmology according to which heaven was situated in the sky above their heads; and that because

we cannot accept such a cosmology, we cannot accept the story that the Apostles saw Jesus rise from Bethany. The rising from Bethany must then be an imaginary detail invented by Luke on the basis of his erroneous cosmology.

But even suppose Luke held this unacceptable cosmology; it does not necessarily follow that his claim that the Apostles saw Jesus rise from Bethany is not literally true. I repeat the analogy which I used in my original article. A stone age savage taken to Cape Canaveral to witness the ascent of a rocket might well on his return describe that ascent in the terms of some unscientific cosmology. That would not prove that his claim to have seen the rocket rise was based on his primitive cosmology, and was therefore to be disbelieved.

And secondly Dr. Dunn arrives at his conclusion by insisting (in spite of the mention of the cloud which hid the ascending Christ from the Apostles' sight) that the angels' phrase "whom you saw going into heaven", must imply that for Luke the journey from Bethany to heaven was one unbroken continuum. But that is not necessarily so at all. If I report that a friend of mine being in Downing Street saw the Prime Minister entering her car and going to America, and watched her going until her car was lost to sight, it would be false to insist that I thought that the journey from Downing Street to America was one unbroken continuum - by car all the way. And it would be grossly unfair to conclude further that my report that my friend saw the Prime Minister leaving by car and going to America must be nothing more than an imaginary expression of my faith that the Prime Minister is now in America.

Now I fully accept that the motivation behind Dr. Dunn's hermeneutic is of the very highest: to make the Christian faith acceptable to modern man. But if Luke intended by his record to say that the Apostles literally saw Jesus rise from Bethany (and as I understand him Dr. Dunn does accept this, NTI 300) it cannot

be sound hermeneutic first to deny that the apostles saw what Luke says they saw, and that to substitute for Luke's intended meaning a meaning which he did not intend.

The issue, then, as it seems to me, is: did the apostles or did they not see Jesus rise from Bethany as Luke says they did? It is a historical question. Maybe I have misunderstood Dr Dunn; perhaps he would in fact affirm that Luke's account of the Ascension is historically true. Maybe he is simply wishing to say, in his form of words, what other people might express by saying that Luke is using the language of sense-impression, as we do with phenomena like sunrise. The "mechanics" behind sunrise are, as we know, more complicated than it appears to our senses; yet a historian will happily and rightly record that so-and-so saw the sun rise, because that is what, as an observer on earth, he did see happen. Doubtless the "mechanics" behind the Ascension were unimaginably complicated; and maybe Dr Dunn means to say little more than that when Luke talks of the apostles seeing Jesus rise up in front of them, he describes it so because that is what they in fact saw happen, that is what that unimaginably complicated event looked like to them, that is how they described it.

Maybe, then, our dispute is about mere words. I fear it is not; but I sincerely hope it is.