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THE FACT AND DOCTRINE OF THE ASCENSION.

BY ALBERT MITCHELL.

THE recognition by the Church of the place and importance of the Resurrection of our Blessed Lord is witnessed by the observance of Easter Day : the realisation by the Church of the significance and value of His Ascension is measured by the neglect of Ascension Day.

§ THE FACT OF THE ASCENSION.

The fact has its place in the earliest extant Christian Creed (1 Tim. iii. 16) :

He who was manifested in [the] flesh :
 Justified in [the] Spirit :
 Seen of [the] angels :
 Preached in [the] nations :
 Believed on in [the] world :
 Received up in [the] Glory.

All the phrases are anarthrous : if you supply (as you must) the definite article in some phrases you must do so in all. "The Glory" is a following of the late Jewish use in substituting that, or some similar periphrasis, for the unspeakable Name (cf. Psalm lxxxv. 9, "that the Glory may dwell in our land"). Hence the phrase "Received up in [the] Glory" is obviously equivalent to "Received up into the Godhead." Whether we read with most authorities **OC** for the opening nominative, or with the few **ΘC**, the meaning and implication of the whole credal confession are unchanged.

If we turn to the actual narratives of the Ascension we find the first in the addendum to S. Mark's Gospel (xvi. 19) : but it has been suggested that the words there, "So then the Lord JESUS, after he had spoken unto them, was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God," do not necessarily imply an eye-witness and are reminiscent of Old Testament passages ; so we pass to the more graphic words of S. Luke (xxiv. 51) : "And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he parted (*diestē*) from them, and was carried up (*anēphereto*) into the heaven." (I leave to the next section the consideration of the variations in MSS.) Rather fuller is the narrative in the Acts (i. 9-11) : "And when he had said these things, as they were looking, he was taken up (*epērthē*), and a cloud received him from their eyes. And while they were looking stedfastly into the heaven as he went, behold also two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, Men of Galilee, why stand ye looking into the heaven ? This JESUS who was received (*analēmphtheis*) from you into the heaven shall so come in-like-manner-as (*hon tropōn*) ye beheld him going into the heaven." The

bald simplicity of the narrative indicates an eye-witness who has no "theory" to offer.

We look at later references : Acts ii. 32, 33 : " This JESUS . . . by the right hand of God exalted " (*hypsōtheis*) : v. 34, " For David ascended not into the heavens " (cf. Ps. cx. 1) : Acts iii. 21 : " Christ JESUS whom the heaven must receive until . . . " : and the vision of Stephen in vii. 35. Passing to the Epistles, we cite S. Peter : 1 Ep. iii. 22 : " Who is on the right hand of God, having gone into heaven " : S. Paul : Rom. viii. 24 : " who is at the right hand of God " ; Eph. i. 20 : " Made-him-to-sit at his right hand in the heavenly [places] far above . . . " ; iv. 10 : " that ascended (*anabas*) far above all the heavens " ; Phil. ii. 9 : " God highly exalted him " (*hyperypsōsen*). In the great treatise " to the Hebrews " : iv. 14 : " who hath passed through the heavens " ; viii. 1 : " Who sat down on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens " ; ix. 12 : " entered-in once-for-all into the holy place " ; v. 24 : " into heaven itself, now to appear-before (*emphanisthēnai*) the face of God for us " (*hyper hēmōn*) ; x. 12 : " he sat down . . . expecting " ; xii. 2 : " he hath sat down at the right hand (*en dextia*) of the throne of God."

Nor must we overlook three references in the Fourth Gospel : vi. 62 : " What then if ye should behold the Son of Man ascending where he was before " (*en to proteron*) ? xvi. 5 : " Now I go unto him that sent me " (v. 10, " I go to the Father ") ; and xx. 17 : " I am not yet ascended . . . but . . . I ascend [am ascending ?]. " We have arrived at phraseology which may be interpretative, but it is interpretative of fact that is not conceived of as challengeable. Whatever the interpretation, the fact is certain.

§ THE NATURE OF THE ASCENSION.

[Here we must examine the text of Luke xxiv. 51. All MSS. have the first half of the statement : *diestē ap' autōn* : " he parted . . . withdrew . . . stood apart . . . from them." But the words *Kai anephereto eis ton ouranon* : " and was carried up (borne) into the heaven," are lacking in Aleph (Cod. Sinaiticus) and D (Bezae) and half a dozen cursives. But they are present in B (Vaticanus), A (Alexandrinus) and most of the other primary uncials and a few cursives. They have been inserted in Aleph by a later hand ; they lie behind the text of the Vulgate and some other versions. The words fall into the class known as " Western non-interpolations " : so William Sanday thinks their omission " probably right," as he inclines to the " Western primitive text." But Alfred Plummer (S. Luke, 566, 7) gives weighty reasons and authority for rejecting the whole theory of " Western non-interpolations." It is very probable that Luke's Gospel circulated in more than one " edition " : that the text of Aleph (our second-best MS.) represents the " first edition," or rough-draft, and the text of B (the best MS. of all, Plummer, " facile princeps ") is the " second edition " or fair-copy, both derived from the hand of the original Evangelist. This would account for the more widely diffused text of B ; and entitle us

to regard the whole passage as primitive. The reticence of the "rough-draft" must, of course, be read with the context, and as Plummer says "a *final* departure is meant."]

Modern theologians are cautious of dogmatism as to the *nature* of our Lord's Ascension. John Charles Ryle says: "Where our Lord's body went when so carried up, is an unprofitable speculation." Brooke Foss Westcott: "We are not to think of the Ascension of Christ as of a change of position, of a going immeasurably far from us. It is rather a change of a mode of existence, a passing to God, of whom we cannot say that He is 'there' rather than 'here.'" Frederick William Farrar: "Heaven is a state, not a locality." William Sanday: "It is sometimes necessary that a symbol should be acted as well as written or spoken." And Henry Barclay Swete: "As the Incarnation was not a physical descent, so the return of the Incarnate to the Father was not a physical elevation."

Yet we need to be careful. We speak *Kat' anthrōpinon* after-the-manner-of-men. But we must guard against any idea that the Ascension was merely a subjective phenomenon. It was an objective fact: and our interpretation must take count of that. The teaching of Holy Scripture is precise: the flesh of the Christ did not "see corruption": that phrase cannot be limited to the period between entombment and resurrection, or the apostle's argument fails. And our Church is emphatic: "The natural Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ are in Heaven and not here": and again (Art. iv): "Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of Man's nature; *wherewith he ascended* into Heaven, and there sitteth, until he return to judge all Men at the last day." It is easy to say lightly that such words are alien to modern theological conceptions: but it is not so easy to ignore interpretations that the Church throughout its history has, with awe and wonder and humble devotion, clung to as part of the Faith. We must recognise that not only human words, but also human thoughts, are wellnigh helpless in the contemplation of God, and that we are driven from prose to poetry—poetry is often truer than prose, and we are apt to overlook how much of Scriptural language is poetry—so that we may be thankful indeed to Arthur Penrhyn Stanley for his gracious words:

He is gone—beyond the skies,
A cloud receives Him from our eyes:
Gone beyond the highest height
Of mortal gaze or angel's flight;
Through the veils of Time and Space,
Passed into the Holiest Place;
All the toil, the sorrow, done,
All the battle fought and won.

Yet, somehow, the human body of Christ, which saw no corruption, was not sublimated but passed "to God"—was "received up in the glory"; and there *remaineth* until "He shall come again with

glory" as the Church confesses "to judge both the quick and the dead." A few years ago scientists might smile at the idea of "anywhere" beyond the starry space: to-day astronomical science tells us that space is not infinite, but doubles back upon itself (see James Jeans). We know that beyond the limits of space there remains—God. However inadequate our thought, the humanity—the human body—of Christ is still *with God*—existent with, in, the Godhead.

§ PLACE OF THE ASCENSION IN OUR LORD'S LIFE.

It has been well said that all lives of Christ are incomplete. "The days of his flesh" do not exhaust the life of the Son of Man. Henry Barclay Swete has written: "The Ascension was the coronation of the Christ, and the Session His enthronement. In the Synoptic Gospels JESUS is the King's Son, rather than the King. . . . The Kingdom was received at the Ascension."

In writing to the Romans, S. Paul indeed put his emphasis on the Resurrection and says that "JESUS Christ," carefully defining him as both the "historical JESUS" and also "the Christ of the Scriptures," was "declared"—*oristhentos*—"to be the Son of God . . . by the Resurrection of the dead": but this is the personal vindication. In his later letter to the Philippians he seems to pass lightly by the resurrection to put his weight on the Ascension: "Wherefore" (i.e. because of the death of the cross) "also God highly exalted him and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of JESUS every knee should bow . . . and that every tongue should confess. . . ." (Cf. Apoc. v. 12.) In his letter to the Ephesians he correlates the two facts (i. 20): "He raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand. . . ."

It is in the great Epistle to the Hebrews that we find our key: cap. ii. 9. "We behold [JESUS], because of the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour, that by the grace of God he should taste of death for every man" (*hopōs chariti Theou hyper pantos geusētai thanatou*). Westcott comments: "The suffering of death—the endurance of the uttermost penalty of sin—was the ground of the Lord's exaltation in His humanity." Again he writes: "the particle (*hopōs*) is not strictly connected with *estephanōmenon* alone, but refers to all that precedes—to the Passion crowned by the Ascension. The glory that followed the death marked its universal efficacy." We are almost trespassing on our next section, as is inevitable: but at least we recognise that it is the Ascension, not the Resurrection, that is the climax. And is that not seen to be necessary: how could we even conceive of the Resurrection without the following Ascension?

§ PLACE OF THE ASCENSION IN OUR LORD'S WORK.

(a) *In the economy of the Atonement.*

Under the old Covenant the ritual and ceremonial of the Day of Atonement is set out in Lev. xvi. Westcott has (in *Heb.*, pp.

279, 280) a convenient summary, taking note of some later usages. But it is to be noted that the High Priest made two entries into "the unseen": the first (under a cloud of incense) after he had made and completed an offering for his own sins "that he die not" (vv. 2, 11, 12) to present himself before the presence of the Lord; the second (without mention of incense) after he, now accepted for himself (vv. 12, 13), had slain the sin-offering for the people, to present himself "for the people" to the Divine gaze. See also Nathaniel Dimock: "Our One Priest on High" (pp. 27, 28, 29): "His right to enter depends upon the offering past. He is admitted not that he may offer a sin-offering, but because his sin-offering has been offered and accepted." Westcott's comment is valuable: "Thus in a figure year by year the people had access to the Presence of God in the person of the High-priest. The fellowship between God and the people, established by the Covenant but marred by sins against its conditions, was restored. By the virtue of an offered life communion became possible. To this end there was a double sacrifice for the High-priest and for the people, and a double representation of the people by the High-priest and by the sin-offering; and till the atonement was made for the High-priest he could only enter the Holy of Holies under the cloud of incense. It is needless to point out the general fulfilment of the type by Christ. One point only, which appears to have been left unnoticed, may be suggested for consideration. The High-priest entered 'the unseen' twice, once for himself, once for the people. May we not see in this a foreshadowing of the two entrances of Christ into 'the unseen'? Once He entered, and came back victorious over death, ready in His glorified humanity to fulfil His work for His people. Again He entered the unseen 'to appear (*emphanisthēnai*) before the face of God for us,' and hereafter returning thence 'He shall appear (*ophthēsetai*) a second time to them that wait for him.'"

There is, then, a most intimate relation between the Atonement and the Ascension. The Ascension is no part of the sacrifice, or the offering. But the offering, the sacrifice, being complete—finished (*tetelestai*), and accepted; there is the presentation to the gaze of God of redeemed humanity. "That which bears [God's] regard is accepted by Him. . . ." "In [Christ] humanity obtains its true harmony with God, and in Him it can bear the full light of God" (Westcott).

So then, in Christ Man is formally shown without spot before God, because of the sacrifice completed on the Cross, attested by the Resurrection, and now in the Ascension noted in the Courts of heaven. Henceforth *Paraklēton echomen proston Patera* (1 John ii. 2). The offering (on Calvary) and the entrance (in the Ascension) together complete the work typified in the Aaronic priesthood. Henceforth "there is no more offering for sin" (*ouketi prosphora peri amartias* (Heb. x. 18))."

(b) *The present, continuing, work of Christ: The Session.*

The offering is past: the Aaronic priesthood abrogated: but

there emerges and remains the kingly priesthood after the order of Melchisedek : " When he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever (*eis to diēnekēs*) he sat down on the right hand of God ; henceforth expecting. . . ." Again Westcott : " By His offering of Himself He has *made purification of Sins* : He has applied the virtue of His Blood, to speak in earthly language, to the scene of the worship of redeemed humanity (ix. 23) : He has taken His seat upon the throne, entering in His humanity upon the full enjoyment of every privilege won by His perfect fulfilment of the will of God. Henceforth He applies for the benefit of men the fruits of the Atonement which He has completed."

The present King-priestly work of our Lord includes :

1. Intercession : Heb. vii. 25, 27 ; ix. 24. It is only in Christ that man can bear God's gaze : 1 John ii. 2. It is as our paraclete that He intercedes. " Prevalent He intercedes " : as the result of past and complete restoration of right relations between man and God : there is no continuance of pleading. " His glorified humanity is the eternal pledge of the absolute efficacy of His accomplished work. . . . Meanwhile, men on earth in union with Him enjoy continually through His blood what was before the privilege of one man on one day in the year " (Westcott).

2. Articulation : Heb. xiii. 15. (Cf. Rom. viii. 26 in the light of vv. 9, 10.) " The fruit of lips which make confession to his Name . . ." " through Him " (*di' autou*). It is only through Christ that articulate utterance of our prayer and praise is feasible and audible in heaven : that is true even of those who do not consciously own His Name : for the work of the Christ is far-reaching beyond human conception. But it is in the " confession to His Name " that the privilege is specifically granted.

3. Mediation of access : Heb. iv. 16 ; x. 19. In each of these passages the keynote is " boldness " (*parrēsia*)—" with eye open " (Syriac Pesh.). We are bold to draw near to the throne : to enter into the most sacred place : because " Man with God is on the throne." " Cast not away therefore your boldness " (x. 35). " Whence this boldness ? " (Chrysostom). " From the forgiveness " (v. 18 : cf. v. 12). Cf. also Rom. v. 10 and Heb. ix. 14. (See also 1 John ii. 2 (*hilasmos estin*)). It is interesting that the old Latin Sacramentaries spoke of " propitiatione perpetua," which our Reformers wisely paraphrased " thy perpetual mercy," a felicitous translation copied in the Roman Catholic English Liturgy for Lay folk.)

(c) *The Mission of the Spirit.*

The Spirit is sent by the Father in Christ's Name, John xiv. 26. But also by Christ from the Father (*para tou patros*), John xv. 26. The condition is Christ's removal, as Man, from Earth, xvi. 7. The gift was not possible till JESUS was glorified, vii. 39. It is therefore because of the Ascension that the outpouring of the Spirit is possible. Westcott : " He sent the Spirit by virtue of his ascended Manhood." Till God and Man were reconciled the Spirit could not dwell in Man.

For the presence of the Spirit "is twofold, in the Society, and in the individual: He 'abideth beside' us in the Church: and He 'is' in each believer." So Westcott writes, reading *esti* in place of the *estai* of the common text. The relation of the Spirit with the individual believer is more intimate than His relationship with the Community. There is much to be learned from this significant fact.

(d) *The Future.*

Here we can say but little: yet (Heb. vi. 20) it is as a "fore-runner" (*prodomos*) that JESUS entered "within the veil" . . . "for us" (*hyper hēmōn*). In the older Covenant the people did not follow their representative. But we shall follow the Christ: this is our "boldness." And we are brought back to Acts i. 11 (*houtos ho Jēsous . . . houtōs eleusetai hon tropon*), "Shall so come in like manner."

Shall we not better observe Holy Thursday—the Ascension Day—the crown of the Christian year?

How immeasurable, incomprehensible, inexhaustible, is our
JESUS.

THE AFTER-LIFE IN THE UNSEEN WORLD. By the Rev. Euston Nurse, M.A., F.R.G.S., Rector of Windermere, C.F. *London: Skeffington & Son, Ltd., Paternoster House, E.C.4.* 3s. 6d. net.

The greater part of this volume of sermons is devoted to the subject of the After-Life. It is unlikely that the author will carry all his readers with him and lead them to the conclusions at which he has himself arrived. He quotes, apparently with entire approval, the familiar hymn which says "Soul and body meet again," in spite of St. Paul's words, "Thou sowest not that body that shall be." In the address on Prayers for the Departed he says "it seems quite clear that Onesiphorus was not alive" at the time St. Paul wrote. But Dr. Handley Moule tells us "there is no need at all to assume that Onesiphorus had died."

Sermons follow upon other subjects—e.g. Harvest Festivals, Hospital Sunday, Armistice Day, the British Legion and Foreign Missions. In the latter Mr. Nurse tells the story of Bishop Lloyd's work in Western Canada, and he gives a brief account of the activities of the S.P.G., C.M.S., Zenana and Colonial and Continental Church Societies, but he has passed without notice the undertakings in South America of the S.A.M.S. The story of the establishment of the Parochial Church Councils, the Diocesan Quota and other recent legislation is told in the closing address, and there is much that tends to stimulate the efforts of Churchpeople to make their witness effective.