

The Ascension.

BY THE REV. W. D. ALLEN, M.A.,

Formerly Fellow and Tutor of Magdalen College, Oxford.

IN Matthew there is no notice of the Ascension. Matthew has for its basis the Palestinian Christian Catechisms. (1) James, the brother of the Lord, was not a witness of the Ascension. The witnesses were "the Apostles whom the Lord chose"—*i.e.*, the eleven. (2) The main interest of the Gospel is the Galilean ministry. The mount by the Sea of Galilee is the scene of the opening and the close of that ministry.

Mark xvi. 20 is ascribed to Aristion, a disciple of the Lord, coupled by Papias with St. John as a living authority in the Church at the time that Papias was writing (A.D. 90-100). It is a short summary; it records, with insistence upon their priority, the appearances to Mary Magdalene and to the two travellers. After these comes an appearance to the eleven. Words spoken by our Lord, probably upon various occasions, are given in concise substance. "After He had spoken to them" (no date or place is mentioned), "He was received up into heaven, and sat down on the right hand of God." The Ascension, *i.e.*, is *an event in time*, which occurred after Resurrection appearances of the Lord. As to its manner, it is conceived as the taking up of Elijah (2 Kings ii.); and as to its result, it corresponds to the sure mercies of David (Ps. cx.).

St. Peter (1 Ep. iii. 22), writing of the Ascension, uses the word "*journeyed*" (*cf.* Acts i. 10, 11): "gazing into heaven as He *journeyed*," "ye saw Him *journeying* unto heaven." St. John uses the same word: "I *go* to prepare a place for you" (John xiv. 2, 3), "I *go* to My Father" (John xiv. 12), etc. "I *ascend*" is the common Johannine term. St. Peter also has (Acts ii. 33) "*exalted*"; *cf.* St. Paul, Phil. ii. 9. In St. Paul, too, we find both "*received up*" (1 Tim. iii. 16), "was received up in glory," and "*ascended*" (Eph. iv. 9): "He that descended

is He also that ascended" high above all the heavens. Heb. iv. 14 speaks of the Lord as "having *gone through* the heavens."

St. John, like St. Paul, contrasts the "descending" with the "ascending." The Lord (John vi.) is "the Bread of Heaven that cometh down from heaven," and in John iii. 13, "No one hath ascended into heaven, except He who out of heaven came down." The Incarnation, *i.e.*, is a coming down. In John vi. 62 the Ascension is a *visible event*. "If, then, ye behold the Son of Man ascending where He was at the first?" and in John xx. 17, "Go, tell My brethren that I ascend," is evidently a message concerning *an event* presently to take place.

It is to be remembered that the Ascension is, as in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the exaltation of One made like unto ourselves, who carrieth with Him through the heavens, into the Holy of Holies, His human nature—spirit, soul and body: "This same Jesus" (Acts i. 11). Our own life in heaven in the age to come is like the life of Jesus—life in a body. The natural body may be transformed into a spiritual body, from glory to glory, but through the transformations its identity remains.

If we come to narratives, the only narratives properly so called of the Ascension are by the same writer, in Luke xxiv. and Acts i. They are both concise summaries supplementing one another. That in Luke is most compressed, but it records *the place*: "He led them out as far as towards Bethany." He led them out, *i.e.*, from the place where they had been "gathered together"—probably the "upper room." Luke speaks of the eleven, and others with them, but from Acts i. 2 it is clear that the eleven only, "the Apostles whom the Lord chose" were the witnesses. "Towards Bethany" may mean as far as the borders of the village—*i.e.*, the foot of the descent of the Mount of Olives. Acts i. 12 gives the exact distance from Jerusalem. Luke has no note of *time*; Acts i. 3 specifies the *forty days*, but incidentally. Luke alone records that the last act of the Lord was to "bless them," "lifting up His hands." Acts omits to note it. Luke says, "was parted

from them." This should be compared, not with the "was received up" of Acts i. 2, but with the "was lifted away" of Acts i. 9. "Was received up" is the technical creed form for the Ascension into heaven; "was parted from them" and "was lifted away" are the first steps of the Ascension, and are visible (contrast Luke xxiv. 31: "became invisible away from them"); the "and was being carried up into heaven," inserted in the second edition of Luke, corresponds to the "journeying into heaven" of Acts i. 10, and is necessary to complete the sense for those who have not already knowledge.

For the "adoration" of Luke, which is also of his second edition, we have in Acts only "a steady gazing into heaven"; and Luke also, in harmony with this adoration, marks the joy that filled the eyewitnesses. On their return, in Luke xxiv. 53, they are occupied with praising God in the Temple; in Acts i. 13, with earnest prayer for the Holy Spirit in the "upper room."

There is to be noticed still, in Acts i. 9, that a cloud received Him away from their eyes after He was lifted away. There was such a cloud at the Transfiguration, and it was luminous, comparable to the Shechinah, an emanation of His glory. Beholding this cloud, in Acts i. 9, they behold "Him" as He journeyed into heaven, till the vision of angels takes its place. The luminous cloud is one with Him.

The gist of the angelic message is that the Lord would come again—"this same Jesus"—"in like manner" as they saw Him go. The Second Coming, Parousia, Epiphany of the Son of Man, would be, *i.e.*, with clouds—"descending in the air." It is plain, then, that those who believed in a Parousia of such a kind would believe without difficulty, and naturally, in an ascension of the same kind, and *vice versa*. St. Matthew and St. James, *e.g.*, believed in such a Parousia at the last day. He to whom the kingdom is given is "One like unto a Son of Man."

We have seen that the creed term, "was received or taken up," recalls Elijah, who in 2 Kings ii. "was taken up" and "went up." So that this narrative has both the New Testament expressions. Elisha saw Elijah as he went, and because he saw him

received a double portion of his spirit. The "was taken up" of the creed form in Mark xvi., Acts i., 1 Tim. iii. 16, presupposes, *i.e.*, a reference to the ascension of Elijah. An ascension like that of Elijah, and coupled with an outpouring of the Spirit, is the foundation of the creed form. *The narrative of the event, i.e., is earlier than the earliest creed form.* Possibly, the idea of such an ascension *may* have been begotten in the minds of the eleven by words or prophecies of the Lord, and in their exalted, ecstatic state they *may* have been deceived. The luminous cloud ascending and the angelic vision *may have been* illusions. Such a theory presupposes, however, not only such an expectation or idea in the witnesses, but some occurrence that gave rise to the illusion then and there. It presupposes, *i.e.*, the "parted from them," "lifted away from them," and even some kind of cloud receiving the Lord.

The illusion, then, is reduced to a narrow compass. "*Going into heaven*" is imagination, set up by the predictive word of the Lord; but *the parting from them, the lifting up away from them, and the cloud receiving Him*, are facts reported. For the rest they relied on the word of the Lord. He was ascending to His Father and their Father, His God and their God, as He predicted that He would. They had no contrary prejudices. Heaven for them was above. Through heaven after heaven, several or seven, the way lay upward to the Holy of Holies. The journey to heaven for them was as certainly upward through space as the ascent to the Hill of the Lord, or Mount Sion. We who have the contrary prejudices stumble at the fact. We ought, then, surely to stumble at the resurrection of the body, at the thought of a human life in the body in the heavenly places. The Ascension filled the minds of the beholders with joy, because it guaranteed that impossible hope, and the Ascension beheld was the foundation, too, of the confident expectation of spiritual strength from above.

We are invited to believe in the spiritual truths symbolized by the creed forms and the mythic narrative, but to reject the husks of literalism. We may ask at least for definition of these

spiritual truths. What are they? The invitation is intelligible if we would sweep away as mythic the supernatural *en bloc*. The ascent into heaven of Jesus expresses, then, the confident certainty of the disciples that the teaching, principles, and methods, of Jesus are "set down at the right hand of God"—*i.e.*, are the teachings, principles, and methods, that are certain to dominate the human race. Mankind will recognize in Him the Saviour, Example, Pattern, and Sovereign, of their race. The foundations are firmly laid, and He sits expecting till His enemies be made His footstool. The moment that we begin to speak of an immortality or a life of the world to come in any other sense than that of a new and better earthly life—in that moment we are involved in endless confusions, if we attempt to separate the fact visible from the truth conveyed. Christianity, *e.g.*, teaches resurrection of the body; the body may be transformed from glory to glory, but it preserves its identity. Human nature, however angelic it may become, preserves its identity. Human relationships continue. Human relationships in human conceptions are relationships of beings in space. The life of the world to come cannot be divested of the notions of life in a better Galilee, a new Jerusalem, a heavenly city, country, or Paradise.

Even the notions of rest in love imply some externalities in form; "in the bosom" of Abraham or of God, "with Christ," "in Jesus," "with the saints," are terms that express spiritual links of spirit to spirit. But unable as we may be to define the clothing, the spirit will be, not unclothed, but clothed upon. Not even God is unclothed. He, too, has a form corresponding to His nature, and a glory visible.

The Ascension visible is the very ground of our assurance of this spiritual faith; whatever difficulties beset the one beset the other. We are afraid of anthropomorphisms. The most subtle of all anthropomorphisms is the anthropomorphism of the Transcendentalist. The process of arriving at Pure Being by abstracting the particulars has for its end Pure Nothing. The characteristic dogma of Christianity is that "all things" do not

come out of "Pure Nothing" but "out from the Father." "True Being" is manifest in sensible forms; by senses it perceives and is perceived. There may be—there doubtless are—other senses than ours; the same True Being may be manifest, perceive, and be perceived, in as many divers ways as there are divers "mansions" for it. There may be transitions from mansion to mansion, but True Being is never naked or homeless, and is always itself. God Himself perceives; God is not He who is eyeless, but He who sees through *all eyes* at will. He beholds the visible beauty of His universe, with its colours, even the bow in the cloud. He who beholds the visible beauty is not philosophically absolute. Eternal life is not a life that belongs to no age; it is a life that endures through "all the ages," and in every age has its own expression—the form, *i.e.*, that is proper to it; it is impatient of each age in its turn as imperfect, and is itself already suited for a better. There is nothing in human philosophy that forbids belief in the Ascension as a fact. There are philosophies that are inconsistent with it. But what have we to do with Platonisms, or Neo-Platonisms, or pure Transcendentalisms?

The scientific objections to the Ascension are some of them such as lie against all miracle—some of them special; special is, *e.g.*, the stumbling-block of "up and down"; "up" and "down" have lost their meaning; "the antipodes have been discovered"; "solar systems, and terrestrial or celestial revolutions round axes or suns," have become the commonplaces of our children's schools. The narrative of the Ascension implies therefore, it is said, a conception of the universe that is now known to be false. "In the old times some things were above and some things below; now all things are upside down and topsy-turvy."

When we know the shape of the universe, whether "all things" are in the form of a revolving ball, or outside or inside a ball, or are perhaps a solid cube with substantial foundations, or are set in a plane surface with "nothing" above or below them, it will be time seriously to consider these naïvetés.

Another kind of objection is that, in passing through the heavens, atmospheres would cease, voids would be met with, and human life or any life would be impossible without constant transformations *en route*. If fools might be answered according to their folly, we might answer that the cloud perchance carried with it the preserving conditions of life, or that even the Lord had life in Himself.

The Ascension is without doubt the crowning miracle of the Gospel. It is the last and greatest stumbling-block. It is also the last and final witness (for those that have followed the Lord) of the sovereignty and power of Him in whom they have trusted. They that were chosen to see the Ascension had passed through a long probation, from stumbling-block to stumbling-block. Miracles had been a stumbling-block, and the lack of miracles a stumbling-block. They had been children of the "all things," and asked of the Lord how these things could be. They had been children of rash belief, and asked for miracles at every turn. The Cross had scattered them, and the Resurrection had gathered them. In one great crisis nothing held them to the Lord but their assurance that He alone had the words of living truth. In the last great crisis even that assurance failed them. Truth itself in Him lay dead, was buried in His sepulchre. Truth itself was false, and the lie that stalked the earth was true. The Ascension was the crowning witness to them that the Truth itself was true and alive for evermore. They worshipped, they rejoiced, they praised God and waited for the promise of that Spirit who is the Lord and Giver of Life. Can this Man give us His flesh to eat, His blood to drink, make us partakers of the life for evermore? Does this offend you? If, then, ye behold the Son of Man ascending where He was before?

The Ascension is a fact in a sequence, an event in a life; it is, again, a fact in a sequence and a turning-point in lives; it is, again, a fact in a sequence and a turning-point in history. The study of it begins with the study of a Person; the first attraction of this Person is that He alone has the words of eternal life;

the final knowledge of Him is that He has in Himself life and the power of life. Power over "all things," over "Nature" and "natural laws," is an essential element in the power of eternal life. If we are the children or servants of "all things," we are fast bound by heredity and environment. They that put "all things" in the place of God rivet the chains of Nature on their inner moral or spiritual life. The Person who ascends up into heaven has power to quicken the souls and bodies of men. The disciples' experience of Jesus is not that He has words of truth only, or in Himself holiness; it is the experience, also, of one who manifests His glory in mastery over "all things." The Ascension is the last in a series of such manifestations of power. Even before the Resurrection there were cognate energies. The storm was quelled; He came to men walking on the sea. It is not scientific, then, to approach the Ascension as though it were the ascension of *quivis homo*, or to dismiss the Ascension as incredible because it overrides "laws of Nature"; to override "laws of Nature" is the very purpose and profession of the Ascension, and He that ascended into heaven is not *quivis homo*, but He who came down from heaven.

Science, indeed, has the business of exploring things possible for *quivis homo*, for "the man in the street"; Christ also died, rose again, and ascended into heaven, for *quivis homo*. Science and the religion of Christ come so into contact; but they come into contact just at this one point: "Is the power of a new life, breaking the bands of sin and nature, given to them who 'see the Lord ascending'?" The answer is written in the history of the Christian Church and in the experience continually renewed from age to age of all who are blessed in believing.

Science, if it deal with the Ascension, must consider, first, not whether *quivis homo*, "the man in the street," can ascend into heaven just as he is, but whether *quivis homo*, believing with all his heart in the Ascension of this same Jesus, is not therein and thereby blessed within himself with the power of a new life.