

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT we owe to this book of the New Testament it is very difficult at this late time of day to realize. Let us, at least, try to conceive what would have happened had it never been written. Let us suppose that the apostolic age had passed away, and that the Christians had had only the Gospel History and the Epistles to the Churches in their possession. Would not an irresistible demand have been made for "the missing link"—for some authentic memorials of those great events which, from the day of Pentecost onwards, had drawn thousands around the cross of Christ and given birth to Christian Churches, not in obscure corners, but in the great centres of population, culture, and commerce? But whence, at that late period, were the materials for such a work to be drawn? However honestly and reverently undertaken, it could only have been constructed out of such incidental allusions to the principal events as are to be found in the Epistles, eked out by the most reliable traditions that could be picked up here and there. And how imperfect and unsatisfactory at the best must this have been! But the task would not fail to be undertaken also by a class of writers bent on gratifying a prurient curiosity and serving a party purpose, and such would palm upon the public, under the name of apostolic history, what was little better than romance. That no production of the former class has come down to us is one of the most striking proofs that a genuine *Acts of the*

Apostles, issued during the lifetime of the apostles themselves and accessible to all, was known to every one, and felt to supersede the necessity of any other, while the apocryphal "Acts of the Apostles" (such as the "Acts of Paul and Thecla," "of Barnabas," "of Andrew," "of Thomas," "of Peter and Paul," "of Andrew and Matthias," with the "Clementine Homilies" and "Recognitions") may shew what wretched stuff in the shape of apostolic history would alone have come down to us but for that inestimable book which in this and some following papers is to engage our attention.¹

This book, then, is the indispensable and invaluable link of historical connection between the Gospels and the Epistles—the proper sequel to the one and the proper preface to the other. In the Gospels we see the corn of wheat falling into the ground and dying; in the Acts we see it bringing forth much fruit. In the one we see Christ laying the foundations of the Church; in the other we see that Church rising into visible existence, first among the Jews of Palestine, next among those of the Dispersion and the Gentiles among whom they lived, until it gained a footing in the metropolis—sweeping majestically from Jerusalem to Rome. Without this book many things in the Epistles would be obscure if not unintelligible, while some would seem contradictory. But presupposing, as the Epistles everywhere do, the historical circumstances

¹ Our object being expository, we must refer the reader for satisfaction on all questions touching the authenticity and canonical authority of this book, its sources of information, its chronology, and such like topics, to the Introductions either to the New Testament in general or to this book by itself.

of the persons addressed, and from these deriving much of their point and nearly all their freshness, we find in this Book of Acts just that key to those allusions which enable us both to understand and enjoy them.

But valuable as it is historically, this Book of the New Testament is of no less value, perhaps, theologically and ecclesiastically. Instead of a ready-made theological system, propounded alike for the acceptance of all, we see here only the simplest elements of Christian truth at first proclaimed—in one aspect to the Jews, and to the Gentiles in another, just as their very different antecedents naturally demanded; and in place of a prepared ecclesiastical platform erected at once wherever the Gospel took root, it is only in the most rudimental sense, and as occasions arose requiring it, that steps were taken to consolidate into visible societies the baptized disciples.

To one other feature of this book we may here advert, though more properly belonging to the head of Introduction, as we may have occasion to refer to it in the course of these papers; we mean its remarkable *omissions*. In a narrative covering a space of at least thirty years it is not easy to see why some things are related with such fulness of detail, while other things, apparently not less important, are recorded either very summarily or not at all. Take, for example, the visit which St. Paul paid to Arabia shortly after his conversion and before his first visit as a Christian to Jerusalem (Gal. i. 17): of this we have no mention in the Acts, nor is a word said of his labours from the time when

he had to fly for his life from Jerusalem to Cæsarea, and thence to Tarsus, until the time when Barnabas, overworked at Antioch, went to seek him out at Tarsus to labour with him (Acts ix. 30, xi. 25, 26). Again, we know that the Churches of Galatia were founded by Paul (Gal. iv. 13-19). But much as we could have desired to have the particulars of this most successful preaching tour—throwing light, as they would have done, on the religious character and condition of the heterogeneous population of that region (Phrygian, Greek, Celtic, Jewish, and Roman)—all the information we have in the Acts is in two clauses, the one telling us that he “went over” that region (xvi. 6), the other that he did so “in order to strengthen all the disciples” (xviii. 23). In Acts xxi. 1-3 we have only the briefest record of a period in the Apostle’s life, which, from the Epistles, we know to have been peculiarly rich in instructive details. In Rom. xv. 19 he says, “From Jerusalem and round about unto Illyricum I have fully preached the Gospel of Christ.” Perhaps the confines of this latter region were reached at the time mentioned in Acts xx. 1, 2, where, referring to Macedonia, it is said that “when he had gone over those parts, and had given them much exhortation, he came into Greece;” but of all this no details whatever are given. In a word, who that reads the impassioned relation which he gives, in 2 Cor. xi. 23-33, of the protracted sufferings and perils of every kind which he underwent in the course of his missionary life—and this long before it closed—can fail to see how scanty a record of all this we have in the Acts of the Apostles? But whatever may

have been the reason for these omissions and abbreviations, one thing is clear, that to have recorded every act in the ministry of the Apostles in full would have swelled the book much beyond its present dimensions, and in all likelihood would not have added proportionately to its utility as a portion of the New Testament.

With these introductory remarks we proceed to trace, in the form of exposition and with this book for our guide, the rise of the Christian Church in its leading stages and outstanding features.

Our historian had so concluded his "former treatise" that no one could from it alone have been sure whether our Lord had not ascended to heaven on the evening of the very day of his resurrection. If any such impression were taken up by his readers he here superabundantly corrects it, telling us (and he alone does so) that He was seen by them for the space of forty days after his resurrection; from which we learn that just ten days elapsed between his ascension and the great Pentecostal day. Among other instructions which He gave them in the course of those forty days He charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to "wait for the promise of the Father," for "ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence," and "ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judæa, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth." So after his ascension—which they watched with a gaze so rapt and fixed that they had to be torn from the

spot by the gentle rebuke of two of the shining attendants on their Lord as He went up, who seem to have lingered behind for that very purpose—"they returned to Jerusalem and went up" (not "into an upper room," as our Version renders it, as if only to indicate the nature of the place, but) "into *the* upper room." That very "upper room" it doubtless was where, with the Twelve, their Lord had kept his last Paschal feast, and, with the Eleven, had instituted the feast of the Supper—a spot to them inexpressibly sacred, and in their minds associated with recollections never to be forgotten. There the Eleven "abode," says the sacred historian, meaning that there they were to be found, holding their stated meetings and spending nearly all that anxious period of ten days. But along with them there were "certain women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brethren, the number of the names together being about a hundred and twenty."

What a contrast was then presented, if only there had been eyes to take it in, between the unattractive spot where stood that upper room, with its lowly roof, its bare walls, its rude furniture, its humble occupants, and the august scenes which had hallowed and irradiated it but a few weeks before, and those very different, those astounding scenes of which it was to be the theatre "not many days hence"—scenes of which the Church, and even the world, have ever since been reaping the blessed fruit, but will not have fully reaped till time shall be no more. Those ten days may fitly be called

THE WAITING TIME.

And what were its characteristics ?

1. It was a transition-period. It stood midway between Christ's work on earth, now completed, and the yet unopened work of the Spirit from heaven. In the history of Redemption, the first, the preparatory, chapter closed on the day of the Incarnation of the Son of God, or rather on "the day of his shewing unto Israel." A long, dreary, chequered period that had been, but it was succeeded by one in all respects the reverse—brief, bright with heaven upon earth, and, though ending tragically, in a sense unknown to human history, bringing life and immortality to light through the darkness and death of the Cross. But it was reserved for "the Spirit of all grace" to make this good in the souls of men; and, with a view to this, the Dispensation of the Spirit—the third and last chapter in the history of Redemption upon earth—was now about to open. But ere the curtain should be drawn which was to disclose this new state of things, a breathing-time of "ten days" was, in the wisdom of God, permitted to take place. It was like the "silence in heaven, about the space of half an hour," between the breaking of the Apocalyptic "seals" and the appearance on the stage of the seven angels, with their "trumpets" of war. But how was this period spent? Well,—

2. It was a time of felt need. The Eleven were told that they were to be their Master's witnesses in Judæa and Samaria, and to the end of the earth; and yet they had, up to this time, no clear comprehension of the Tale they were to tell, while they could not but feel that they had neither position, culture, nor influence to move the world, and not one ground to hope for success save in their assurance of the

truth of their Story, and the help which they might receive from above in the telling of it. As they thought of this, what sinkings of heart would be apt to come over them, and what a tendency to shrink from such a work altogether. These feelings, instead of being lessened, would rather be intensified; as day after day found them in the upper room, but for some counteractive. But there was more than one such. For,—

3. It was a time of expectancy. How often would they recall, and find it indispensable to recall, such words as these: “Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you;” “Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.” Ill as they would understand what that promise meant, yet being peremptorily charged not to stir from Jerusalem till it was fulfilled, they could not but hope that it must mean something which, if it did not dispel all their fears, would qualify them in a way to them unknown for their arduous mission. But it was no time of silent waiting, for,—

4. It was a time of prayer. “These all” (says the historian) “with one accord continued stedfastly in prayer.” And who can have any doubt about what would be the burden of those prayers? Methinks, had one listened, he might have heard them saying, “We are poor and needy, yet the Lord thinketh on us. For didst Thou not say to us whilst Thou wast yet with us, ‘I will not leave you desolate, I will come to you.’ Desolate truly we are without Thee, Lord; yet surely Thou art here, and wondrous is our sense of nearness to Thee. Haply this is that which Thou saidst, ‘Yet a little while

and the world seeth me no more, but ye see me; because I live, ye shall live also.' But that '*power from on high*'—what is it, Lord? If we must 'be endued with it' ere we know it, we bow in submission, but long for light; and if when it comes—that '*gift of the Holy Ghost*'—we shall then comprehend our message, and have courage to proclaim it, and power to bring all nations to the obedience of faith, we are ready to say, in spite of all our feebleness, Here are we, send us." But besides this,—

4. It was a time of fraternal conference. For as they could hardly pray on without intermission from beginning to end of each meeting—these meetings extending over the greater part of each day—it seems only reasonable to assume that the intervals would be filled up by free interchange of recollections and reflections on the astonishing events and thrilling scenes in the earthly life of their now glorified Lord, and the encouragements thence arising. How eagerly, when called on in these intervals, would one and another stand up to tell what they had witnessed on this occasion and that; and how would some, of quicker memory than others, recall much that fell from the lips of Him who spake as never man spake: the women, too, who were honoured to go up and down with Him in Galilee and minister to Him of their substance, could they altogether hold their peace on such occasions, as their hearts glowed with memories of those scenes? And as all the incidents would be caught up and turned into materials for praise and encouragements to prayer, surely there would be no want of varied interest in each successive meeting. And since, in

appointing a successor to Judas, he behoved to be one "who had companied with them all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among them, beginning from the baptism of John unto that same day that he was taken up from them," may not the two who were selected as possessing these qualifications—Joseph, called Barsabas, and Matthias—have only shewn themselves to be disciples of such old and worthy standing by addresses delivered by them on one of those occasions, recalling the incidents that first drew them to their common Lord? But this suggests one other feature of these meetings. They were not wholly spent in waiting and praying and exchanging recollections and reflections. For,—

5. It was also a time of action. On one of those days Peter—now fully restored, and, as originally designed, taking the lead—rose and explained to the assembly why the vacancy amongst the Twelve, which the fall of Judas had created, behoved to be filled up; and having pointed out the qualifications required, he left it to themselves to select one or more of their number whom they might lay before their enthroned Lord for his approval. Two were accordingly fixed on, over whom, after solemn prayer, lots were cast; and the Divine will in the matter being thus sought, he on whom the lot fell "was numbered with the eleven apostles." This left nothing to be done and nothing to be desired, save that descent of the promised Spirit which was to give birth to the Church of Christ, and open up a new era in the world's history.

“Apostles, prophets, pastors, all,
Shall feel the shower of mercy fall,
And starting at the Almighty's call
Give what He gave,
Till their high deeds the world appal,
And sinners save.”

Two other thoughts suggested by this preparatory scene will complete what we think it necessary to say on it.

There is something both affecting and instructive in Peter's way of speaking of Judas, when explaining why his place would have to be filled up. “He was *numbered* among us” apostles, as if scarcely of them. “This man,” he calls him, who “was guide to them that took Jesus.” And yet the speaker had himself, not many weeks before, foully dishonoured and deeply wounded his Lord. But as Peter was from the first a far higher style of man than Judas, so that “look” which his Lord gave him, and the bitter weeping with which it sent him out from the scene of his fall, were enough to shew how different was the character of his sin from that of the traitor, and his sorrow from that which in the other wrought only death. Accordingly, to Simon only did the Lord, on the day of his resurrection, appear *alone*. (Luke xxiv. 34.) What passed at that interview we shall never know here. Probably it was too sacred for disclosure, if even capable of being put into words. But it sealed their reconciliation and cemented them more closely than ever, and nothing was then wanting to his conscious and acknowledged restoration to the primary position assigned him at the beginning, but that public manifestation and authoritative expression of it before

the other apostles on that occasion when, after dining with them, and making him thrice express his love to Him for his thrice denying Him, He bade him "feed his lambs," and then "feed his sheep." And here we find him rising in the upper room, conscious that his position was fully known to, and recognized by, all present—speaking of Judas, not as a fallen disciple, but as all along a dead branch on the Tree of Life, a stranger in the Lord's house, and never in "his own place" until, by his own awful act and deed, he "went to" it. And if, in the selectest of all select and sacred circles, there was one such ("one of you is a devil"), who shall say that at the great day there will not be found those who, like Judas, have "eaten and drunk in his presence, and," like him, "done in his name many wonderful works," to whom He will have to say, not "Ye are fallen from grace," but, "I never knew you."

But mark now the bearing of Peter towards his fellow-believers. No priestly attitude does he assume. Though he leads, he associates the whole assembly with himself. He will have *them* to choose candidates for the apostleship; he accepts *their* nomination; and though it is all but certain that in laying these two before the Lord, *he* was the spokesman, this is not said. All the historian tells us is that "*they* prayed and said." Nor was it only on this first occasion, when he might be supposed rather to shrink, that he thus acted, but on every subsequent recorded occasion his carriage and procedure were entirely in keeping with this; so little ground is there not only for the lordly assumptions of those

who call themselves the successors of "the prince of the apostles," but for that ecclesiastical ambition which has proved the bane and blight of many who repudiate Romish pretensions.

Thus are we brought to the great Pentecostal day, with its marvellous first-fruits, described in the second chapter of this Book with such graphic freshness and vividness of detail that, as we read it, we seem to be drawn into the midst of it, and may hope, as we attempt to trace it in our next paper, to catch some faint reflection of its glow and to drink into its life-giving spirit.

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