**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**2 KINGS-002. THE TRANSLATION OF ELIJAH AND THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven."*

*2 Kings 2:11*

*"And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven."*

*Luke 24:51*

These two events, the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of our Lord, have sometimes been put side by side in order to show that the latter narrative is nothing but a variant of the former. See, it is said, the source of your New Testament story is only the old legend shaped anew by the wistful regrets of the early disciples. But to me it seems that the simple comparison of the two narratives is sufficient to bring out such fundamental difference in the ideas which they respectively embody as amount to opposition, and make any such theory of the origin of the latter absurdly improbable, I could wish no better foil for the history of the Ascension than the history of Elijah's rapture. The comparison brings out contrasts at every step, and there is no readier way of throwing into strong relief the meaning and purpose of the former, than holding up beside it the story of the latter. The real parallel makes the divergences the more remarkable, for likeness sharpens our perception of unlikeness, and no contrast is so forcible as the contrast of things that correspond. I am much mistaken if we shall not find almost every truth of importance connected with our Lord's Ascension emphasised for us by the comparison to which we now proceed.

**I. The first point which may be mentioned is the contrast between the manner of Elijah's translation, and that of our Lord's Ascension.**

It is perhaps not without significance that the place of the one event was on the uplands or in some of the rocky gorges beyond Jordan, and that of the other, the slopes of Olivet above Bethany. The lonely prophet, who had burst like a meteor on Israel from the solitudes of Gilead, whose fervour had ever and again been rekindled by return to the wilderness, whose whole career had isolated him from men, found the fitting place for that last wonder amidst the stern silence where he had so often sought asylum and inspiration. He was close to the scenes of mighty events in the past. There, on that overhanging peak, the lawgiver whose work he was continuing, and with whom he was to be so strangely associated on the Mount of Transfiguration, had made himself ready for his lonely grave. Here at his feet, the river had parted for the victorious march of Israel. Away down on his horizon the sunshine gleamed on the waters of the Dead Sea; and thus, on his native soil, surrounded by memorials of the Law which he laboured to restore, and of the victories which he would fain have brought back, and of the judgments which he saw again impending over Israel, the stern, solitary ascetic, the prophet of righteousness, whose single arm stayed the downward course of a nation, passed from his toil and his warfare.

What a different set of associations cluster round the place of Christ's Ascension--Bethany, or, as it is more particularly specified in the Acts, Olivet! In the very heart of the land, close by and yet out of sight of the great city, in no wild solitude, but perhaps in some dimple of the hill, neither shunning nor courting spectators, with the quiet home where He had rested so often in the little village at their feet there, and Gethsemane a few furlongs off, in such scenes did the Christ whose delights were with the sons of men, and His life lived in closest companionship with His brethren, choose the place whence He should ascend to their Father and His Father. Nor perhaps was it without a meaning that the Mount which received the last print of His ascending footstep was that which a mysterious prophecy designated as destined to receive the first print of the footstep of the Lord coming at a future day to end the long warfare with evil.

But more important than the localities is the contrasted manner of the two ascents. The prophet's end was like the man. It was fitting that he should be swept up the skies in tempest and fire. The impetuosity of his nature, and the stormy energy of his career, had already been symbolised in the mighty and strong wind which rent the rocks, and in the fire that followed the earthquake; and similarly nothing could be more appropriate than that sudden rapture in storm and whirlwind, escorted by the flaming chivalry of heaven.

Nor is it only as appropriate to the character of the prophet and his work that this tempestuous translation is noteworthy. It also suggests very plainly that Elijah was lifted to the skies by power acting on him from without. He did not ascend; he was carried up; the earthly frame and the human nature had no power to rise. No man hath ascended into heaven. The two men of whom the Old Testament speaks were alike in this, that God took them. The tempest and the fiery chariot tell us how great was the exercise of divine power which bore the gross mortality thither, and how unfamiliar was the sphere into which it passed.

How full of the very spirit of Christ's whole life is the contrasted manner of His Ascension! The silent gentleness, which did not strive nor cry nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets, marks Him even in that hour of lofty and transcendent triumph. There is no outward sign to accompany His slow upward movement through the quiet air. No blaze of fiery chariots, nor agitation of tempest is needed to bear Him heavenwards. The outstretched hands drop the dew of His benediction on the little company, and so He floats upward, His own will and indwelling power the royal chariot which bears Him, and calmly leaves the world and goes unto the Father. The slow, continuous movement of ascent is emphatically made prominent in the brief narratives, both by the phrase in Luke, He was carried up, which expresses continuous leisurely motion, and by the picture in the Acts, of the disciples gazing into heaven as He went up, in which latter word is brought out, not only the slowness of the movement, but its origin in His own will and its execution by His own power.

Nor is this absence of any vehicle or external agency destroyed by the fact that a cloud received Him out of their sight, for its purpose was not to raise Him heavenward, but to hide Him from the gazers eyes, that He might not seem to them to dwindle into distance, but that their last look and memory might be of His clearly discerned and loving face. Possibly, too, it may be intended to remind us of the cloud which guided Israel, the glory which dwelt between the cherubim, the cloud which overshadowed the Mount of Transfiguration, and to set forth a symbol of the Divine Presence welcoming to itself, His battle fought, the Son of His love.

Be that as it may, the manner of our Lord's Ascension by His own inherent power is brought into boldest relief when contrasted with Elijah's rapture, and is evidently the fitting expression, as it is the consequence, of His sole and singular divine nature. It accords with His own mode of reference to the Ascension, while He was on earth, which ever represents Him not as being taken, but as going: I leave the world and go to the Father. I ascend to My Father and your Father. The highest hope of the devoutest souls before Him had been, Thou wilt afterwards take me to glory. The highest hope of devout souls since Him has been, We shall be caught up to meet the Lord. But this Man ever speaks of Himself as able when He will, by His own power, to rise where no man hath ascended. His divine nature and pre-existence shine clearly forth, and as we stand gazing at Him blessing the world as He rises into the heavens, we know that we are looking on no mere mysterious elevation of a mortal to the skies, but are beholding the return of the Incarnate Lord, who willed to tarry among our earthly tabernacles for a time, to the glory where He was before, His own calm home, His habitation from eternity.

**II. Another striking point of contrast embraces the relation which these two events respectively bear to the life's work which had preceded them.**

The falling mantle of Elijah has become a symbol known to all the world, for the transference of unfinished tasks and the appointment of successors to departed greatness. Elisha asked that he might have a double portion of his master's spirit, not meaning twice as much as his master had had, but the eldest son's share of the father's possessions, the double of the other children's portion. And, though his master had no power to bestow the gift, and had to reply as one who has nothing that he has not received, and cannot dispose of the grace that dwells in him, the prayer was answered, and the feebler nature of Elisha was fitted for the continuance of the work which Elijah left undone.

The mantle that passed from one to the other was the symbol of office and authority transferred; the functions were the same, whilst the holders had changed. The sons of the prophets bow before the new master; the spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha.

So the world goes on. Man after man serves his generation by the will of God, and is gathered to his fathers; and a new arm grasps the mantle to smite Jordan, and a new voice speaks from his empty place, and men recognise the successor, and forget the predecessor.

We turn to Christ's Ascension, and there we meet with nothing analogous to this transference of office. No mantle falling from His shoulders lights on any of that group, none are hailed as His successors. What He has done bears and needs no repetition whilst time shall roll, whilst eternity shall last. His work is unique: the help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself. His Ascension completed the witness of heaven, begun at His resurrection, that He has offered one sacrifice for sins, for ever. He has left no unfinished work which another may perfect. He has done no work which another may do again for new generations. He has spoken all truth, and none may add to His words. He has fulfilled all righteousness, and none may better His pattern. He has borne all the world's sin, and no time can waste the power of that sacrifice, nor any man add to its absolute sufficiency. This King of men wears a crown to which there is no heir. This Priest has a priesthood which passes to no other. This Prophet does live for ever, The world sees all other guides and helpers pass away, and every man's work is caught up by other hands and carried on after he drops it, and the short memories and shorter gratitudes of men turn to the rising sun; but one Name remains undimmed by distance, and one work remains unapproached and unapproachable, and one Man remains whose office none other can hold, whose bow none but He can bend, whose mantle none can wear. Christ has ascended up on high and left a finished work for all men to trust, for no man to continue.

**III. Whilst our Lord's Ascension is thus marked as the seal of a work in which He has no successor, it is also emphatically set forth, by contrast with Elijah's translation, as the transition to a continuous energy for and in the world.**

Clearly the other narrative derives all its pathos from the thought that Elijah's work is done. His task is over, and nothing more is to be hoped for from him. But that same absence from the history of Christ's Ascension, of any hint of a successor, to which we have referred in the previous remarks, has an obvious bearing on His present relation to the world as well as on the completeness of His unique past work.

When Christ ascended up on high, He relinquished nothing of His activity for us, but only cast it into a new form, which in some sense is yet higher than that which it took on earth. His work for the world is in one aspect completed on the Cross, but in another it will never be completed until all the blessings which that Cross has lodged in the midst of humanity, have reached their widest possible diffusion and their highest possible development. Long ages ago He cried, It is finished, but we may be far yet from the time when He shall say, It is done; and for all the slow years between His own word gives us the law of His activity, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.

Christ's Ascension is no withdrawal of the Captain of our salvation from the field where we are left to fight, nor has He gone up to the mountain, leaving us alone to tug at the oar, and shiver in the cold night air. True, there may seem a strange contrast between the present condition of the Lord who was received up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God, and that of the servants wandering through the world on His business; but the contrast is harmonised by the next words, the Lord also working with them. Yes, He has gone up to sit at the right hand of God. That session at God's right hand to which the Ascension is chiefly of importance as the transition, means the repose of a perfected redemption, the communion of the Son with the Father, the exercise of all the omnipotence of God, the administration of the world's history. He has ascended that He might fill all things, that He might pour out His Spirit upon us, that the path to God may be trodden by our lame feet, that the whole resources of the divine nature may be wielded by the hands that were nailed to the Cross, that the mighty purpose of salvation may be fulfilled.

Elijah knew not whether his spirit could descend upon his follower. But Christ, though, as we have said, He left no legacy of falling mantle to any, left His Spirit to His people. What Elisha gained, Elijah lost. What Elisha desired, Elijah could not give nor guarantee. How firm and assured beside Elijah's dubious Thou hast asked a hard thing, and his If thou see me, it shall be so, is Christ's It is expedient for you that I go away. For if I go not away the Comforter will not come, but if I depart, I will send Him unto you.

Manifold are the forms of that new and continuous activity of Christ into which He passed when He left the earth: and as we contrast these with the utter helplessness any longer to counsel, rebuke or save, to which death reduces those who love us best, and to which even his glorious rapture into the heavens brought the strong prophet of fire, we can take up, with a new depth of meaning, the ancient words that tell of Christ's exclusive prerogative of succouring and inspiring from within the veil: Thou hast ascended on high; Thou hast led captivity captive; Thou hast received gifts for men.

**IV. The Ascension of Christ is still further set forth, in its very circumstances, by contrast with Elijah's translation, as bearing on the hopes of humanity for the future.**

The prophet is caught up to the glory and repose for himself alone, and the sole share which the gazing follower or the sons of the prophets straining their eyes there at Jericho, had in his triumph, was a deepened conviction of his prophetic mission, and perhaps some clearer faith in a future life. Their wonder and sorrow, Elisha's immediate exercise of his new power, the prophets immediate transference of their allegiance to their new head, show that on both sides it was felt that they had no part in the event beyond that of awe-struck beholders. No light streamed from it on their own future. The path they had to tread was still the common road into the great darkness, as solitary and unknown as before. The chariot of fire parted their master from the common experience of humanity as from their fellowship, making him an exception to the sad rule of death, which frowned the grimmer and more inexorable by contrast with his radiant translation.

The very reverse is true of Christ's Ascension. In Him our nature is taken up to the throne of God. His Resurrection assures us that them which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him, His passage to the heavens assures us that they who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them, and that all of both companies shall with Him live and reign, sharing His dominion, and moulded to His image.

If we would know of what our manhood is capable, if we would rise to the height of the hopes which God means that we should cherish, if we would gain a living grasp of the power that fulfils them, we have to stand there, gazing on the piled cloud that sails slowly upwards, the pure floor for our Brother's feet. As we watch it rising with a motion which is rest, we have the right to think, Thither the Forerunner is for us entered. We see there what man is meant for, what men who love Him attain. True, the world is still full of death and sorrow, man's dominion seems a futile dream and a hope that mocks, but we see Jesus, ascended up on high, and in Him we too are made to sit together in heavenly places. The Breaker is gone up before them. Their King shall pass before them, and the Lord at the head of them.

There is yet another aspect in which our Lord's Ascension bears on our hopes for the future, namely, as connected with His coming again. In that respect, too, the contrast of Elijah's translation may serve to emphasise the truth. Prophecy, indeed, in its latest voice, spoke of sending Elijah the prophet before the coming of the day of the Lord, and Rabbinical legends delighted to tell how he had been carried to the Garden of Eden, whence he would come again, in Israel's sorest need. But the prophecy had no thought of a personal reappearance, and the dreams are only dreams such as we find in the legendary history of many nations. As Elisha recrossed the Jordan, he bore with him only a mantle and a memory, not a hope.

Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven. How grand is the use in these mighty words of the name Jesus, the name that speaks of His true humanity, with all its weakness, limitations, and sorrow, with all its tenderness and brotherhood! The man who died and rose again, has gone up on high. He will so come as He has gone. So--that is to say, personally, corporeally, visibly, on clouds, perhaps to that very spot, and His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives. Thus Scripture teaches us ever to associate together the departure and the coming of the Lord, and always when we meditate on His Ascension to prepare a place for us, to think of His real presence with us through the ages, and of His coming again to receive us to Himself.

That parting on Olivet cannot be the end. Such a leave-taking is the prophecy of happy greetings and an inseparable reunion. The King has gone to receive a kingdom, and to return. Memory and hope coalesce, as we think of Him who is passed into the heavens, and the heart of the Church has to cherish at once the glad thought that its Head and helper has entered within the veil, and the still more joyous one, which lightens the days of separation and widowhood, that the Lord will come again.

So let us take our share in the great joy with which the disciples returned to Jerusalem, left like sheep in the midst of wolves as they were, and let us set our affection on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.