

Theology on *the Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes.
Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit
or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the
copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the
ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the
links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbadshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THE ANGELS ASCENDING AND DESCENDING
ON THE SON OF MAN.*

ST. JOHN i. 52.

THAT something more or less mysterious was intended by our Lord in his last words to Nathanael may be gathered from the connection in which they stand. For it is evident that our Lord laid Himself out, if I may say so reverently, to astonish Nathanael, and to take, as it were, by storm, without any preliminary investment, the citadel of his guileless mind. This is but one instance out of many of the extreme diversity and originality with which He dealt with different characters, because He knew what was in man and could exactly adapt Himself to it. It would seem in this case that, as He had begun with the declaration of something startling and, humanly-speaking, inexplicable ("When thou wast under the fig-tree I saw thee"), so He would go on in a similar strain with something yet more strange and profound. Had Nathanael felt himself upon that abrupt announcement to be in the presence of some incarnate Mystery? He should presently come to know that the Prophet of Nazareth was a Mystery far more sublime than he could then imagine: he should see the angels of God ascending and descending upon that Son of Man.

Now we may be sure that at that time Nathanael did not know what it was that our Lord promised him; but no doubt he afterwards came to understand the meaning of it; and we, too, may surely expect to understand it, for otherwise it would not have been recorded. Nevertheless, opinions are not a

little divided on the subject, and there are, at least, three lines of possible interpretation.

I. It may be said that at the Day of Doom all nations shall see the Judge accompanied and surrounded by the angel hosts; and that our Lord here tacitly contrasts the striking glory of his future coming with the outward meanness of his then appearing. Against this we might set as decisive the *ἀπ' ἦπτι*, "hereafter" (or, rather, "henceforth"), were it certainly in the Original; for it clearly refers to future time, and not to one particular point in future time. But the balance of Manuscript authority seems to be slightly against the retention of the word, although it is hard to suggest any reason why it should have been interpolated. Apart from this very possible and decisive addition, however, the passage itself lends little countenance to the interpretation in question. For this interpretation gives no meaning to the "ascending" and "descending" here spoken of; and it deprives the promise of any special reference to Nathanael and other "guileless" souls, for *all* men shall see the Judge coming in his glory with his holy angels; and that sight is ever spoken of rather as the conviction and terror of unbelief than as the privilege and confirmation of faith.

II. It is said by many (perhaps by most of the Commentators) that the allusion is to those apparitions of angels, in the Garden, at the Resurrection, at the Ascension, of which mention is made by the Evangelists. I confess that this appears to me extremely weak, for I do not see any probability that Nathanael ever saw an angel in his

life,—or, if he did, it was not when our Lord was present. It is, indeed, evident from the Gospel record that no eye of man beheld the angels of the Desert, or the angel of the Agony : their ministry was a secret one, just as the consolations of God always are to the soul exhausted with conflict or wrung with anguish. Again, it is evident that no eyes save those of the faithful women saw the angels of the Resurrection: they were invisible to the less refined and “sublimated” vision of the two Apostles who visited the tomb; and even to the holy women they appeared so uncertainly that to some they seemed as two, to others as a single angel.¹ It is true that the Apostles beheld the angels of the Ascension, who “stood by them” as “two men in white apparel;” but we do not know that Nathanael was one of the Twelve—the question turning entirely on his very doubtful identification with Bartholomew. Even if he *did* see those angels, it is manifest that they could not be said, by any stretch of language, to be “ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” As in the only other case in which they were seen as attendant on the Son of Man, their appearing was a sign of his absence, not of his presence; not until He had risen and departed from the tomb did the angel descend and roll away the stone,—did angels come and sit, one at the head, the other at the feet, where He *had* lain; not until He was taken up into heaven and a cloud received Him out of their sight, did

¹ It does not appear to me, from St. Matthew xxviii. 4, that the keepers had any vision of the angel. I should suppose they were blinded by the blaze of light and terrified by the convulsion which shook the massive stone out of its place.

angels stand beside the Apostles to tell them of his coming again. I do not doubt that holy angels were constantly near Him, and about Him; and He, with the vision of perfect faith, unclouded by any selfishness or mistrust, may well have seen them, even as He was seen of them (1 Tim. iii. 16): but, manifestly, it was part of the lowness and, so to speak, ordinariness of his human life that no display of angelic attendance was ever allowed for Him or by Him. The "Son of man" was no more visibly or literally "ascended" or "descended" on of angels than any other child of earth: few and far between were the attestations of his superhuman origin, and they invisible, it may be, save to the eye of the Forerunner (John i. 32), inaudible save to the ear of the beloved Disciple (John xii. 28, 29). I reject, therefore, with some confidence, the idea that any seeing with bodily eyes is here intended.

III. In seeking a more satisfactory solution we must remember that our Lord was speaking to a devout student of the Holy Writings,—one to whom the words of Moses were at least as familiar as they are to us. And even to us the remarkable phrase—"ascending and descending," used of the "angels of God"—is so familiar that it cannot but recall to our minds the story to which it belongs. There was a child of man long ago who "lighted upon a certain place,"—because, I suppose, he was too tired to go any further,—upon whom, as he slept, the angels of God ascended and descended in a vision of the night. How should Nathanael fail to divine in a moment that it was of Jacob's ladder our Lord spake, intimating that He was the true

Child of Man in whom the vision should be fulfilled; *for* whom heaven should be ever opened; *on* whom and *through* whom the angel intercourse betwixt heaven and earth should be established for evermore?

Supposing that the reference really is to that old vision, we conclude at once that the “seeing” here promised is a spiritual seeing, a seeing of faith, a seeing with those eyes of the soul which are enlightened by the Holy Ghost to behold hidden mysteries: and we have further to inquire what those mysteries are which are fulfilled and realized in Christ, having been signified long before in Jacob and in his vision of the ascending and descending angels.

Now, I do not think that the significance of Jacob’s vision can well be missed, at least in its outlines. Jacob, as we know, was a man who had “faith,” *i.e.*, he had a considerable mental grasp upon unseen realities, and set a considerable value upon spiritual blessings, such as those attached to the birthright. At the same time, like other able and subtle men, Jacob was one who relied greatly upon his own address and resources to reach his ends and bear him through his difficulties. No doubt, as he lay down on his hard bed that night, his last thought was that now he must depend more than ever upon his own craft and perseverance for any future success. And the vision which God gave him corresponded both to the better and to the worse side of his character: it corresponded to his faith, his mental hold upon the unseen; for this alone gave the vision any meaning for him, any power for good over him: it corresponded also to his characteristic cunning, to his confidence in his own policy; for it revealed to him

a whole sphere of blessed and holy agencies, innumerable, incessant, indestructible, whereby God would work out the same ends which *he* had thought to achieve by his own paltry cleverness : he knew now that the Almighty had *not* left men to reach their ends, and overreach their fellows, as best they might, by any means they could ; he knew now that the intercourse between heaven and earth, between God and man, was open, unbroken, continuous, and close. This was, no doubt, the meaning of those angels ; no staircase of the greatest king and most attentive to his realm was ever so crowded with the feet of them that came and went upon the business of his kingdom, as was that staircase of the heavenly Monarch with the swift incessant feet of those his angel messengers. Surely it was a lovely vision, fraught with blessed truths ; yet it was but a vision, once given, and to one ; and he perhaps not fully alive to its meaning.

But in the fulness of time came One on whom the faithful of all ages, gazing, behold the heavens opened and the angel-intercourse of God and man realized and perfected for evermore. For hitherto there had been a bar to the free development of this intercourse ; not indeed on God's side, but on man's. God sent his missives and his messengers, but they were not received : the angels brought his blessings and his bounties down, but they waited in vain for the prayers, the praises, the thanksgivings, which they should have carried up again : but few had even so much faith as Jacob : but few made vows as acceptable even as his. So it seemed as though the staircase had been broken down in course of

ages, or had become moss-grown and impassable for want of use.

But in the Son of Man, who, like Jacob, was an exile and a wanderer, not having where to lay his head,—who, like Jacob, had left his Father's home and taken a long journey through desolate places to seek for himself a Bride, even the Church ; in this Son of Man, the Head and Flower of the human family, the Second Adam, who summed up in Himself the whole regenerate race of men ; *in* Him, and *for* Him, the heavens were always open, and the angels of God were always passing and repassing between the Father and the Incarnate Son.

And still this is not all. For doubtless the angels ascend and descend upon the Son of Man, not as a solitary individual, like Jacob, but, as I have said, as the Head and Representative of all regenerate mankind. They light on Him, as it were, because his humanity is that lofty stainless peak which itself of all earth lies the nearest to heaven, and whence alone all earth may well be reached. On Him they descend with all those gifts and graces and holy influences which the Father giveth to Him immeasurably, and through Him to all his members in measure. From Him they ascend, bearing to the Father every cry of the penitent, every sigh of the sorrowful, every dumb aspiration of the ignorant, every vague yearning of the ill-at-ease ; for He is the one Mediator through whom all this mutual interchange must pass of prayer and healing, of asking and giving.

There is another way of regarding this prophecy which is not really different. We may say, and say truly, that the Son of Man lives on still, still a pil-

grim and a stranger, still an exile from home, still nursed in hardship, still tutored by adversity and made perfect through sufferings; still He hath not where to lay his head, and is desolate and exceeding sorrowful. For the Son of Man, ascended in his proper Person, lives on in the persons of his earthly members. By reason of the unearthly but most real unity and *solidarité* between Him and them, his life is theirs and their life is his. We know that the Son of Man still sits by the wayside of life, begging, in the person of the "least of these his brethren :" even so the Son of Man lodges yet in the empty wilderness, an exile and a wanderer, in the persons of his tried and suffering members. But even so the angels of God do ever ascend and descend upon this Son of Man. They ascend upon Him, the risen Head ; they descend upon Him in us, the earthly members : we and He are not divided; we "sit in heavenly places" in Him, He wanders through the lonely waste in us ; and between is that perpetual intercourse which makes the needs and sorrows of the desert to be felt upon the throne,—which makes the desert to be glorified with the beauties and the graces of heaven.

I venture to think that all this, and much more in the same line of thought, was intended by our Lord's words to Nathanael; and certainly nothing more literal, nothing less far-reaching, can seem at all adequate or satisfactory. In conclusion I ought to say that this interpretation has been pointed at by many, in ancient and in modern times. I have but tried to work it out.

RAYNER WINTERBOTHAM.