

# GOD OF ALL SPACE

Part 3: The Glory of the Celestial by A.O. Hudson

## Impact of space science upon Christian belief

THIS VISIBLE UNIVERSE is not the only sphere of life. The experiences and the convictions of many testify that there is a world of living intelligence above and beyond the physical, not perceptible by any of the five human senses, but a real world nevertheless. Sometimes it is called the `spiritual' world and its citizens `spiritual' beings because it lies beyond the bounds of man's senses, and sometimes the `celestial' world, because it lies beyond the bounds of man's geography. Our own universe is an atomic structure built up from ninety-two elements, ranging from hydrogen, the lightest, to uranium, the heaviest--discounting a few heavier manmade ones--which, by chemical combination with each other, form all known substances, and powered by radiated energy vibrating at rates between a hundred thousand times a second and many, many millions, technically called the "electro-magnetic spectrum."

Everything in this universe obeys the laws set by this atomic structure and this energy range; what may lie outside of these, we do not know and as men will never know since all our knowledge is derived from observational instruments which themselves are constructed from these atoms and can respond only to these energy vibrations. Our information regarding the celestial world comes to us through the Bible, the revelation of God, creator of both this world and that, supplemented a little in our own day by the reasoning of men whose deepening knowledge of the physical world is enabling them vaguely to see what possibilities may conceivably lie beyond it.

The decline of Christian belief characteristic of the past century or more had led to a very general scepticism as to the experience of a `spiritual' world and of `spiritual' beings; the leaders of scientific thought and research have for a number of generations ignored any claims for the reality of anything that could not be demonstrated physically either by the natural senses or some man-made observing or measuring instrument. But now some of these scientists are not so sure; they are beginning to perceive the possibility that there can be and might well be some kind of world and some kind of life outside the scope of our physical universe, and in so doing they concede the case to the Bible.

In this, as in so many matters nowadays, the progress of scientific discovery is demonstrating the intrinsic harmony of science with Divine revelation. At a conference of high level United States physicists in 1967, during a discussion on the problems of detecting life in space, it was said that we may no longer insist that life can only be manifested in material bodies such as ours, bodies of micro-cellular structure; there is no certainty that an entirely different form of life structure is not possible. At a rather earlier date another atomic physicist, appearing in a B.B.C. feature, referred to the possible existence of other universes dependent on other forces not capable of interaction with our own, so that they might conceivably exist, so to speak, on a different wavelength and be quite imperceptible to us although present in reality all the time.

Firsoff, in "Life Beyond the Earth" suggests that there is "no reason why longer or shorter wavelengths" (than those of the electro-magnetic spectrum, which govern all the phenomena of our universe) "could not form the basis of sensory perception. . . . We cannot be sure that there are no other forms of vibrant energy that could be so used. . . . These may not be obstructed by living tissues, and so the organs of perception or emission may be in the brain."

All this is to say that modern scientific thought no longer denies the possibility of a world which is a real world but beyond our powers to perceive, inhabited by living intelligences who themselves cannot be perceived by man, but can make their presence known and communicate directly to the human brain. This is the Biblical position; that world and those beings are given, by the Apostle Paul, the name `celestial'.

The inhabitants of the celestial world are popularly termed `angels' and are depicted in religious pictures and sculpture as white-robed human beings, furnished with wings for the purpose of travel from the realms above. (This particular form was developed long before men knew that the earth's atmosphere extends only a few miles up and that wings are useless in space.) The term `angel' is the Greek word carried over into English; in both the Old and New Testaments the respective Hebrew and Greek words mean, simply and solely, a messenger. This is derived from the fact that whenever the Bible tells of a celestial being visiting the earth, he comes, naturally, as a messenger, with a commission to fulfill. But in thus coming he must of necessity make himself apparent to men.

One of the powers characteristic of celestial beings is evidently that of metamorphosing or `materializing' into a human form which they can create for the time being from the elements of the earth around, a question of manipulating so much carbon, oxygen, hydrogen and so on, to attain the desired end. The alchemists of the Middle Ages spent a lot of time trying to transmute the elements--turning lead into gold was their chief aim--without success; nowadays it is becoming commonplace, such as, for instance, the conversion of natural gas into protein cattle food. There is nothing too wonderful today in thinking of a visitant to this earth thus clothing himself temporarily with an earthly body in order to render himself visible and audible.

In the majority of instances such visitants appeared as ordinary men, as in the case of the three who visited Abraham (Gen. 18), those who appeared to Joshua (Josh. 5), Gideon (Judges 6), Manoah (Judges 13), and so on. Sometimes the appearance was in the form of a transcendently glorious being, but still human, as to Daniel (Dan. 10), but only when the importance of the occasion made it appropriate.

New Testament manifestations to Zacharias, Mary, Peter, and Paul were of the same general nature. Our Lord, after his resurrection and until his ascension, having been raised in the glory of his celestial nature, appeared to his disciples in various human forms assumed for the occasion--a gardener to Mary, a stranger on the way to Emmaus, and so on. One has to picture the celestial being as completely independent of the physical characteristics of our universe, able to come and go at will, and adapt himself to whatever local conditions exist.

This leads to the reflection that the celestials must possess powers of mobility, to use a human expression, of a totally different nature from those of man. It has already been remarked that man's hopes of traveling to the distant stars are tempered with the reflection that such journeys must inevitably take thousands or millions of years. The nature of celestial life imposes no such

limitations. The angel sent to Daniel in response to his impassioned prayer upon behalf of Israel (Dan. 9) appeared to him at about three o'clock in the afternoon of the day on which the prophet began his supplication. Even allowing for six hours' praying, if the angel was subject to human limitations of movement from one place to another and even traveled at the speed of light--and Professor Einstein gives reasons why, in his view, nothing can possibly travel faster than light--he could not have been farther away than the outermost planet of the solar system, Pluto, when he started. No one is going to suggest that Heaven is situated on the dark and cold chaos which is Pluto. There is, too, an interesting little reflection on those three men who visited Abraham. Two of them left the patriarch at not earlier than three in the afternoon to walk to Sodom, forty miles distant over rugged and trackless mountainous terrain. They arrived there before five! It is clear that once out of Abraham's sight those two angels abandoned human form, and adopted their own natural methods of transit before appearing again as men at the gates of Sodom two hours later. It would appear that a characteristic of the celestial nature is the power of what we would call instantaneous translation from one place to another irrespective of distance.

All this might lead to the conclusion that celestial beings are disembodied intelligences, like powerful minds without bodies, having no real world of their own, but just existing in space. In warning against this, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that just as earthly, terrestrial creatures possess bodies, organisms, by means of which the mind can make contact with its environment and know itself for what it is, so with the celestial. "There are celestial bodies, and there are terrestrial bodies, but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another . . . there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body . . . as we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly." (I Cor. 15)

Celestial beings are real beings with bodies suited to their environment and powers, and they exist in a real environment or world. Just as men can live only by absorbing energy from food, air and sunlight, wherewith to power their thoughts and actions, so in some similar way celestial beings, whose lives are sustained by God just as surely as are those of men, must absorb and give out energy, which has its source ultimately in God, in living their lives and carrying out their activities. Likewise must the celestial world be a real world constituting an environment in which those beings are 'at home' and which provides all things needful both for continued life and continued activity. This latter is an important consideration. The idea that the 'other world' or the 'future life' is a place or state in which nothing is ever done and nothing new ever happens is ethically unsound and theologically incorrect. One might have some sympathy with the legendary charwoman, who, after a lifetime of hard work, had her tombstone bear the words, "Gone to do nothing forever and ever," but an eternity of idleness is likely to be more frustrating than comforting. Nearly fifty years ago, J.W. Dunne, in one of his books, pointed out that if a man was placed in a world in which everything was done for him and he was never required to take any decision or make any effort, so that the mind had nothing to do and the brain responded automatically to every changing situation, then, in time, man would become an unconscious automaton; he would cease to think and cease to be a human being.

In more recent years, British and Canadian Universities have conducted experiments in the interest of astronaut research, to discover what happens when a man is deprived of all external sense impressions by being enclosed in a cubicle without light or sound or anything to do. It was found that thinking became difficult after a few hours and no subject could tolerate more than a few days of the condition. Similar experiments in the United States led to the conclusion that

unless the mind is stimulated by outward impressions and changing phenomena, growth and development ceases; if continued long enough the condition would lead to unconsciousness and death.

It follows that an essential factor in continuing life is change and activity and this must be as true in the celestial sphere as in the terrestrial. It is not surprising therefore that we find casual allusion in the Scriptures to this aspect of the celestial world. "Bless the LORD, O you his angels," says David, "you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word. Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will." (Ps. 103:20,21) Here is a vivid picture of powerful beings dedicated to the service of God and living their lives in devoted activity according to his will. The nature of their occupations and achievements are of necessity unknown to us, and in any case would be largely incomprehensible; man's only contact has been the occasional visit of solitary messengers for brief periods in past times.

One can imagine a remote island inhabited only by primitive people to whom a very occasional westerner comes on a brief visit and goes away again; how much of the multifarious activities and the achievements of western civilization on earth could those simple people be expected to glean. All we can say is that the scope and the grandeur of life in that celestial world and the variety of its accomplishments must be infinitely greater than anything that a man could imagine. This much at least is indicated by the inspired words of the eighth psalm, wherein man is described as created a little lower than the angels even though constituted the custodian and administrator of all other living things on earth. It is apparent also from Job 38:7 that at the time of terrestrial creation the celestial world already existed and its citizens 'shouted for joy' at what was to them a new departure in divine creative activity.

That the celestials, although of vastly superior intellectual powers to humans, are subject to limitations in knowledge is inferred from Scriptures indicating that they are not cognisant of all that God purposes to do. (Mark 13:32; I Pet. 1:12) That they evince an intense interest in the work of God amongst men can be concluded from the statement that there is joy among the angels in heaven over one sinner that repenteth (Luke 15:10), and some indication in Matthew 18:10 that one of their duties, or the duty of some of them, is the protective oversight of Christ's disciples here on earth. There may be more in the old idea of 'guardian angels' than this present-day matter-of-fact world is prepared to concede. It might be justifiable to think that in the new earth of the future, when evil is banished and man reconciled to God, there will be closer and much more frequent contact between the two worlds than is the case or is even possible at this present time.

There is no sin in that world--its citizens are altogether and in every respect conformed to the Divine ideal, fully developed and occupying their ordained place in Creation. As such, that world forms a model for this, and one day this earth and its society will be like that. The 'Lord's Prayer' is one authority for that expectation: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Twin principles expounded by Christ: love for God and love for neighbor--must there exercise universal sway, and in the power of so dynamic and orderly a righteous society it can be expected that united and cooperative effort and achievement carries life ever onward into widening realms of unimaginable splendor.

This is the Christian Heaven. The hope which the New Testament holds out to all faithful dedicated disciples of Christ is that following the close of terrestrial life they will experience a

resurrection to enduring life in that world. The Apostle Paul speaks of those who `sleep in Jesus' and are awakened by instantaneous translation to the celestial sphere at the Second Advent of Christ when he comes to establish his Millennial Kingdom upon earth. (I Thess. 4:14-17; I Cor. 15:51,52) The future life of the church in eternal association with Christ involves a great deal of Apostolic teaching which is not relevant to the present subject, it may well be, though, that our Lord's declaration in John 14:2,3 to the effect despite the "many mansions" in his Father's house He must needs go away to prepare a place for his followers is a hint that the world in which the church finds its ultimate home is one created on a still higher level of sentient life, beyond even the angelic celestial. Such may be necessary in order to fulfill in transcendent measure the promise that He will present us "faultless before the presence of his Father with exceeding joy." (Jude 24) This also is one of the many unrevealed aspects of the future which will one day be made plain.

Beyond the lengthening vistas of all such possible celestial spheres, above the highest and most glorious of all created forms of life, is God, the Author and sustainer of all Creation, the source of all life, of all energy, of all that is. In that incomprehensible Presence is enshrined the supreme mystery, a mystery which, perhaps none of His creatures will ever fathom. Without beginning, without end, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, "even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." All that we are, all that we shall be, is of Him. (To be concluded)