

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/robbradshaw>

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

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

CRITICAL NOTE ON ST. JOHN xiv. 2.

DR. WESTCOTT in his Commentary on St. John's Gospel gives the following explanation of the words, "*In My Father's house are many mansions.*" "The rendering comes from the Vulgate *mansiones*, which were 'resting places,' and especially the 'stations' on a great road, where travellers found refreshment. This appears to be the true meaning of the Greek word here; so that the contrasted notions of repose and progress are combined in this vision of the future."

The interpretation here suggested of the word *μονή* will, I believe, come as a surprise to most students: it is found in none of the recent Commentaries on St. John, such as those of Olshausen, Meyer, De Wette, Tholuck, Luthardt, and Godet; and it introduces a thought alien to that ordinarily associated with this Verse. The questions, therefore, naturally arise, first, what is the evidence on which the proposed interpretation rests? and, secondly, does it suit the context in which the word is found?

In classical Greek *μονή* is used as signifying an abiding in a place, a delay (Thuc., i. 131, vii. 47, 50; Herod., i. 94; Eur., Tro., 1129); it is applied to what is fixed and stationary, as opposed to what is transient and in motion (Pl. Crat., 437 B.; Pol., iv. 41). The word does not occur in the LXX., but it is found once in the Apocrypha, viz., 1 Macc. vii. 38 *μη δὲς αὐτοῖς μονήν*; here Schleusner suggests that it means either "continuance" or else "a fixed abode," illustrating the latter meaning by a reference to St. John xiv. 2. In Josephus *μονή* signifies "an abode" (Ant., xiii. 2, 1); in another passage (Ant., viii. 13, 7) it appears at first sight as if he used the word in the sense adopted by Dr. Westcott in the note that I have quoted, for he applies it to the stay of Elijah in the cave of Mount Horeb, but the context and the construction alike seem to prove that here also the word signifies "an abode," for the sentence runs as follows: *καὶ διατέλει ποιούμενος ἐν αὐτῷ τὴν μονήν*.

So far, then, as the usage of the word goes, the evidence appears to be against the interpretation suggested by Dr. Westcott: none of the Greek Lexicons that I have been able to consult mention the meaning which he gives to *μονή*, except Schleusner who in his Lexicon of the New Testament writes as follows: "Apud Græcos scriptores *μονή* etiam haud raro *stationes σταθμούς* significat, in quibus milites, in itinere constituti, aut alii, itinera facientes quietem capere

solent. Conf. *Amelii*, Illustrationem difficilium N.T. locorum. T. ii. p. 404, qui ostendit, *diversoria* quoque *mansionum* nomine veteribus maxime *Suetonio* appellari consuevisse." I have been unable to find the work to which reference is made here, and so cannot verify Schleusner's statement. There is no question that *mansio* came to signify "a halting place;" but no authorities are quoted for this usage earlier than Pliny and Suetonius. Instances in which *μονή* has a similar meaning can also be produced (cf. Plut., De Profect. in Virt., 76 D. ? text probably corrupt; Paus. x. 31; Athan. Apolog. cont. Arianos, 29); but in order to establish Dr. Westcott's interpretation it must be proved that this was its recognized and ordinary signification in the first century. That such was not the case appears to follow from the fact that the Greek Fathers do not connect that meaning of *μονή* with St. John xiv. 2. There was a difference of opinion amongst them as to whether this Verse implied that there would be various degrees of glory and happiness assigned to the Saints hereafter in proportion to their merits; most of the Fathers agree that the words "*many mansions*" do contain this thought: but it never seems to have occurred to any one of them that the *μοναί* were only resting places and not abiding homes (cf. Iren., Adv. Hær., v. 36, 2; Clem. Alex., Strom., ii. 6; vi. 14; Theodoret, In Cant. Canticorum, v. 7, 8; Interp. 1 Ep. ad Cor. xv. 40; Theod. Mops., In Evang. Joh., xiv. 2; Cyr. Alex., Comm. in Johannis Evang., Lib. ix.). Some uncertainty might be felt as to the sense in which Chrysostom understood the word, for he paraphrases it thus: *ἀφθονία γὰρ ἐκεῖ πολλή καταγωγίων*, were it not that the context shewed that he uses *καταγωγία* not as meaning "an inn" but "a place of reception," since the words immediately preceding those that I have quoted are, *ὅτι καὶ ὑμᾶς ἐκεῖνος ὁ χώρος δέξεται ὁ καὶ τὸν Πέτρον*. Moreover, in his Homily on 2 Corinthians v. 1, where he goes more fully into the explanation of the word, he points out that St. Paul uses *σκῆνος* to shew the temporary character of our earthly dwelling, as compared with the eternal homes of heaven; and Chrysostom illustrates the contrast by quoting St. John xiv. 2, thus making *μονή* the opposite of *σκῆνη*.

But the testimony of the Latin Fathers is even stronger, for *mansio* had the recognized signification of "a halting place," and yet it does not appear ever to have been regarded as having this meaning in St. John xiv. 2. Tertullian (Resurr. xli.) interprets

it as being synonymous with *domus*. Augustine (in Joh. Evang.) paraphrases it in the words "cum Christo esse mansuros." But perhaps more important than all is the testimony of Jerome; he uses the word *mansio* in the sense of "a halting place," for one of his letters (Ep. lxxviii.) is headed "De xlii. mansionibus Israelitarum in deserto;" but he does not connect that meaning with St. John xiv. 2; for, in combating with scorn the view that by the many mansions are meant the various Churches scattered through the world, he remarks (Adv. Jov., ii. 28) that Christ is speaking in this Verse "de cælorum mansionibus et eternis tabernaculis," and that each will receive a mansion for himself by the goodness of God, according to his deserts.

It is hard to understand, if "stations" or "halting places" be the true meaning of *μοναί* as used by St. John, how it happens that the Fathers are unanimous, so far as my investigation has gone, in giving another signification both to *μονή* and *mansio* in this Verse.

But the difficulties in the way of Dr. Westcott's interpretation that present themselves in connexion with the context in which the word occurs here are still stronger. In the first place it introduces into the Verse a confusion of metaphor: "*In My Father's house are many halting-places:*" it needs but to translate this interpretation into plain language in order to see how unnatural the sequence of thought becomes. There seems no doubt but that in the words *ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ Πατρὸς μου* allusion is made to the Temple, and that the design which Christ had in view was to carry the thoughts of his Apostles from the material building to the heavenly archetype; but that, in immediate connection with this thought, reference should be made to the stations upon a great road, appears wholly unnatural. Nor is it conceivable that with the idea of the Temple before them the Apostles could have connected that signification with the word *μονή*, when there was another meaning both more suitable and apparently more familiar to them.

But, further, Dr. Westcott's interpretation seems to interrupt the harmony of the paragraph of which this Verse forms part. Christ had just spoken to his Apostles words which, apparently for the first time, shewed them that He was about to be taken not only from the Jews, but also from them (Chap. xiii. 33). The tidings of this separation, so soon to take place, shut out every other thought from their minds; the "*new commandment*" seems scarcely to have been heard by them; for as Christ paused, St. Peter at once leads

Him back to the subject that filled the hearts of them all. He receives an answer and a warning; and then, as the eye of Christ rests upon the mourning group around Him, He speaks words of comfort and hope, assuring them that the parting would be but for a little time, since, in the home of Him who was his Father and theirs, there was room for all his children, many abiding-places provided for them. *"If it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am there ye may be also."* Surely it mars the harmony of these words with the circumstances that called them forth to read into this Verse an allusion to progress as an element of the life to come.

But, lastly, it must be borne in mind that the word *μονή* not only occurs here, but also in Verse 23; no one would think of interpreting the latter passage as meaning "we will come and make our halting-place with him," for the contrast appears to be between the temporary dwelling of Christ among men (Chap. i. 14 *καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν*) and the permanent abiding of the Trinity in man; but if *μονή* is used in this sense in Verse 23, does not this furnish a clue as to its meaning in Verse 2?

While, therefore, it is doubtless true that the life to come will be a constant rest, and yet a constant progress—an eternal abiding with God, and yet an eternal approaching unto God—still neither the history of the word *μονή* nor the context in which it stands here seems to justify the view, that these two contrasted notions "are combined in this vision of the future."

T. STERLING BERRY.