

## **Into God's Glory**

Acts 1.1-11

When I was at theological college, one of my colleagues claimed to have calculated how far away Jesus was. He said that, assuming Jesus ascended from just outside Jerusalem in about 30 AD, and assuming also that he didn't take off like a rocket but ascended at a stately 15 miles an hour, he would be somewhere around the orbit of Saturn. I have no idea whether his figures were accurate, and I'm glad to say that he made this announcement with a very naughty twinkle in his eye, but it did provoke an interesting – and at times heated – discussion about the meaning of the Ascension of Jesus Christ for modern Christians.

The Ascension is described only by St Luke: in his gospel (Luke 24.50-53) and in its sequel *The Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 1.1-11). These books weren't written until 58-60 AD, a generation after the events they purport to describe; but the Ascension of Jesus into heaven is referred to, or at least implied, in many other places in the New Testament, not least in the letters of Paul, probably the earliest of our New Testament writings (Romans 8.34; Ephesians 1.20; 4.8-10; 1 Timothy 3.16; Hebrews 4.14; 1 Peter 3.22). A generation later still, around the turn of the first century, it became a major theme of John's gospel (John 3.13; 6.62; 8.14,21; 13.3,33,36; 14.4-5, 28; 16.5,10,17,28; 20.17).

What Luke says in his gospel is this:

While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

(Luke 24.51),

and in Acts,

As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

(Acts 1.9).

The Ascension had great theological importance for the early church, especially as a marker. First, it marked the end of the forty-day period during which the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples (Acts 1.3). Secondly, it marked the point after which the Holy Spirit would be poured out in power on the Apostles and on those who believed in the Good News they preached (John 7.39, Acts 2.33-34). Thirdly, it marked the final completion of Jesus' earthly ministry and the beginning his reign at the right hand of God (Romans 8.34, Ephesians 1.20-23, Colossians 3.1), which would be his location until his Second Coming (Acts 1.11).

The first point is important for understanding the resurrection of Jesus. According to Luke, the resurrection appearances of Jesus lasted for forty days (Acts 1.3). After that brief period, there would be no more physical, bodily resurrection appearances of Jesus. The church has traditionally taken this forty-day limit to mean that all later encounters with Jesus would have to be classified as something else, perhaps as visions or dreams; and these included Jesus' appearance to Paul on the Damascus road. Paul himself lists the other resurrection appearances of Jesus, but distinguishes his own experience as an "untimely" birth (1 Corinthians 15.8).

This point is crucial for the Church, because without it there would almost certainly have been endless stories of the risen Christ appearing all over the place, bringing all sorts of supposed new revelations to all sorts of people. But the doctrine of the Ascension meant not only the end of Jesus' resurrection appearances, but also the end of his authentic teachings. There have, of course, been many claims about fresh revelations, but the mainstream Church has been able to bat these aside because of the Ascension. It's important to note, therefore, that Paul's Damascus road experience contains no new teaching. With the Ascension, the revelation of God in Christ is perfected and completed.

Going back to my provocative colleague for a moment, Luke is very careful in his double account of the Ascension to guard against implying that Jesus simply took off from a launch site outside Jerusalem and kept on going until the Apostles lost sight of him. When he says, "a cloud took him out of their sight," he's not talking about just any passing cloud. You can see the Acts story depicted in our Ascension window. As Jews who were familiar with their own Scriptures and traditions, the early Jewish Christian communities who first read Luke-Acts would have recognised in the reference to "a cloud" a symbol of the presence of God.

In Exodus, we read that

Yahweh went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way  
(Exodus 13.21),

and that

Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of Yahweh settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud

(Exodus 24.15-16),

and again that

The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle. Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud

was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of Yahweh was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey

(Exodus 40.34-38, cf. Numbers 9.15-23).

Similarly, in the description of the dedication of the Temple by King David in 2 Chronicles, we read that

The house of Yahweh, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of Yahweh filled the house of God

(2 Chronicles 15.3),

And when King Solomon performs the same rite in 1 Kings,

a cloud filled the house of Yahweh, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of Yahweh filled the house of Yahweh

(1 Kings 8.10).

Finally, the prophet Ezekiel witnesses the departure of God's presence from the Temple:

Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the house when the man went in; and a cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of Yahweh rose up from the cherub to the threshold of the house; the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of Yahweh.

(Ezekiel 10.3,4),

I'm sure you get the very obvious point that Luke is not describing an Ascension away from Earth out into the vast reaches of interplanetary space. The New Testament tradition of the Ascension could not have taken into account our modern understanding of how the solar system is constructed, but that doesn't mean for one moment that its authors were naïve or stupid. Quite the contrary, they didn't believe that Jesus ascended into the sky, but rather into heaven, into the presence of the glory of God, which is another thing entirely, sometimes glimpsed perhaps, but ultimately unknown and unknowable to us on Earth. Hence what an anonymous 14th century English mystic called, 'the cloud of unknowing'.

This raises another question: Can a person, whether divine or not, inhabit heaven while still in the body? Going back to the Old Testament – always a good idea! – we read of two significant individuals who appear to have entered God's presence while still in the body:

All the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him

(Genesis 5.23-24),

and

As [Elijah and Elisha] continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven

(2 Kings 2.11).

So there is Scriptural precedent for persons particularly favoured by God to be taken up into heaven, and whether this makes better sense to us interpreted as a literal or as a symbolic acknowledgement of God's favour we can decide for ourselves. Both Enoch and Elijah are described as being assumed into heaven without experiencing death first. (Roman Catholics are taught the same thing about the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.)

The case of the Ascension of Jesus is different. Jesus undergoes crucifixion and resurrection, so that the body in which he ascends is his risen, transformed and glorified body, still bearing the marks of his Passion, but no longer vulnerable to earthly suffering. John Calvin, along with many other theologians, was clear on this point when he wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that, "His body was raised up above to the heavens," and this is what Christians traditionally believe about our own ultimate destiny; as Paul writes in *Philippians*,

[The Lord Jesus Christ] will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself

(*Philippians* 3.22).

Although we have a much better understanding than our forebears did of the solar system and our physical position within it, we still commonly use the sort of language that implies a heaven "above", while recognising, of course, that we don't mean it literally. And although Luke himself uses the same kind of language, he clearly intends something other than a literal "going up to heaven", and the cloud is a biblical symbol of the presence of God. So Luke tells us that Jesus passed from the presence of the disciples into the presence of God.

The 20th century Scottish theologian T F Torrance said,

It should not need to be said that the use of spatial language... does not imply some alleged mythical 'threestoried' picture of the world; even in the Old Testament it is clearly recognized that 'the heaven of heavens cannot contain God' (1 Kings 8.27, 2 Chronicles 2.6, 6.18; Acts 7.48f.)

(*Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 1976).

And the American theologian Thomas Oden said,

It is doubtful that the language of descent and ascent in the New Testament ever really intended such a flat, unmetaphorical, literally three-story picture, even in the first century

(*The Word of Life*, 1992).

In the end, I think, what matters is this: In their experience of the Ascension, our early Christian forebears learned that Jesus would no longer be with them in his own body. They were to return to his teachings and learn to recognise him in the bodies – the faces – of their fellow human

beings, and especially in those to whom they could offer love and service. And as they did so, they found that God in Christ was in fact still present with them in the Holy Spirit, who equipped them with the love and power they needed to continue Jesus' ministry.

But that's a story for next week...

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