

The Ascension of Jesus: Myth or Fact?

"The account of the Ascension is quite useless to the historian," wrote the German church historian and theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). His claim made a lasting impact. Many people, nowadays, even within the church, deny the historicity of the ascension. Perhaps one of the reasons for disbelief is the seemingly fantastic nature of the event. The narrative of Jesus' ascension, portrayed in Acts 1:9, as an upward spatial movement may be a great scene for a movie, but it appears absurd in an age of space travel.

Modern theologians also question the ascension. They claim that the literal ascension narrative is conditioned by its time and culture. It was a pre-scientific age when people imagined heaven to be "up there" so that Jesus had to be "taken up." They argue, "We have now an altogether different understanding of the universe, an up-to-date view of science, technology and space. We should, therefore, demythologize the ascension." In the mid 1960s, the Anglican bishop and theologian John A. T. Robinson wrote a book entitled *Honest to God* which scandalized orthodox believers and was acclaimed by some. He called the incarnation of our Lord "God dressed up - like Father Christmas" and the atonement as "frankly incredible to man come of age." He objected to the notion that Jesus is up there somewhere, because he felt that modern cosmology had done away with the possibility that heaven is up and hell is down.

We may point to liberal theologians and their questioning of the ascension, but how meaningful is it for us? Has this central fact of the doctrine of salvation disappeared from our theological "radar screen," from our thinking and faith experience? Or is it still alive and well for us? Most of us pay special attention to Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. But judging by the poor attendance at the Ascension Day services, the same cannot be said of the ascension. We may profess it when we recite the Apostles' Creed, yet forget about it the rest of the week. This is regrettable, as Augustine once said, the Ascension Festival "is that "a festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished. For unless the Saviour had ascended into heaven, his Nativity would have come to nothing... and his Passion would have born no fruit for us. His most holy Resurrection would have been useless." Our Lord's incarnation, His crucifixion and resurrection is meaningless without His ascension! In the ascension His incarnation continues. He ascended bodily to heaven. He remains, therefore, united to our human nature.

His resurrection and ascension (separated by 40 days) are closely intertwined events (Eph1:10, 2:6). The early Christians lived out of the assurance of these facts. They were willing and ready to be martyred for their ascended Lord.

In our time of theological confusion and controversy, political uncertainty, unprecedented prosperity in North America combined with the fear of a widening of the war against terrorism, the ascension of our Lord is a crucial doctrine to recover. The belief that Jesus is in heaven right now should greatly affect how Christians live and function in our world today. Jesus is not dead. The tomb is empty. We serve the risen and ascended Saviour.

Jesus' Expectations of the Ascension

The New Testament refers to the ascension in many places. Our Lord descended to earth to ascend to heaven (John 3:13) The ascension was pivotal in our Lord's teaching. Jesus asked those who were offended by Him, "What if you see the Son of Man ascended to where He was before!"(John 6:62) Having lived with His Father from the dateless past, Jesus as He lived and ministered on earth longed to be back in heaven - His original home. The heavenly host sang praises at His birth. The Holy Spirit descended upon Him at His baptism. An angel came from heaven to minister to Him in Gethsemane. He eagerly anticipated His ascension.

He predicted that His disciples would witness His departure to heaven (John 6:62). He could steadfastly face the cross, knowing that it would be followed by His coronation (cf. Luke 9:51). He promised His own that He would go and prepare a place for them in His Father's home (John 14:3). With all authority, He pronounced "I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). He forbade Mary to touch Him seeing that He had not yet ascended (John 20:17). Our Lord prophesied His ascension and longed for it. And the New Testament attests to fact of His ascension.

The Ascension: a Historical Fact

The Gospel proclamation may not be divorced from history. As Christ rose bodily from the grave so He bodily ascended to heaven. The church does not proclaim a myth but a historical event. And she does not only confess the historical Jesus but the reality of His presence today. "The Ascension," notes Peter Toon, "is the removal of the resurrected body of Jesus from space and time into the immediate presence of God."

Our Lord's ascension was visible and public. He wanted His disciples to know that His departure was final. His disciples were to wait for somebody else, the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). Our Lord left this world to pass into the other world, to remain there until His second advent (Acts 3:21). The author of Hebrews says Jesus "will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Heb 4:14; 9:28)

Luke has much to say about the importance of eyewitnesses for the verification of the Gospel. The disciples clearly saw Jesus ascending to heaven. It happened while Jesus was in the act of blessing His disciples on their return from Jerusalem (Luke 24: 50,52). As His hands were lifted up in a priestly benediction, Jesus vanished out of sight. They were witnesses. That's why we can be sure of the fact of the ascension. The apostles also mention frequently the ascension. Paul speaks of Jesus "received up in glory (1 Tim.3:16). He exhorts the Colossian believers to "set your hearts on things, where Christ is seated at the right of God." (Col.3:1) Peter declares that Jesus has "gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God" (1 Pet. 3:22).

The Exalted King

What does Jesus' ascension mean for Himself and us? John Calvin summed up Jesus mediational role as taught in the Scriptures: "In order that faith may find a firm basis for salvation in Christ, and thus rest in him, this principle must be laid down: the office enjoined upon Christ by the Father consists of three parts. For he was given to be prophet, king, and priest" (Cf. Heidelberg Catechism Q.A. 31). Although our Lord is always Prophet, Priest, and King, in this article I will concentrate on His King ship. With the Nicene Creed, the church confesses:

"He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father. He shall come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead; and his kingdom shall have no end."

His ascension was the crowning moment, the act of enthronement, inaugurating His eternal reign as the God-human Lord. Christ is not going to be King. He is the exalted King and Lord of lords - today. He is seated at the right hand of God, which implies the position of dignity, honour and authority. He had completed His redemptive work on earth. The victory was won. Our Lord's death on the cross in principle broke the hold of Satan over the hearts and lives of people. He now governs all the affairs of the world for the glory of His Father. In heaven, He rules as King for the glory of God for the fulfillment of His purposes (Heb1:3). As King, He exercises power in upholding and controlling the world (Eph1:22, Col 1:15-19). All power over angels and humankind is His. He has full authority over all other authorities whether spiritual, demonic or otherwise (Matt.28:18, Acts19:17, Phil.2:10) He is the Ruler over the church by His Word and Spirit and guards her against her enemies. He is sovereign over His world and over history.

Public Truth

What is the relevance of the ascension in an age of Internet, technology and scientism, which is deliberately debunking the Gospel? The ascension brings the claims of the Gospel right into the public square, the open market of real events in space and time. The Gospel engages the realities of both personal and public life. It is not otherworldly or anti-intellectual. It speaks about heaven as well as earth. There is no distinction between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the temporal. The Christian faith is not just for home and church, or for the life to come. It is lived in this world. Jesus was tried in a public court. His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension were witnessed by many. In other words, we claim that the Gospel is public truth, a fact in a real world. The Gospel resists spiritualizing the ascension.

Today Christians are told that their faith is a private matter, and is best kept that way. This is a false dichotomy between public and private faith. Many claim that the world of fact, science, education, politics, government, leisure and work are realms of public truth. What is truth can be known and seen. Therefore, religious faith and belief systems are placed in the area of private truth. "These statements of faith may be true for me but I certainly would not impose them on your view of the world." But they make up their own standards of right and wrong. What may be right today may be wrong tomorrow. Consequently, they

impose their own humanistic approach to a morality that says, "My ways are always right and everything else must fit in."

Let me give an illustration from politics. The privatization of faith has advanced more rapidly in Canada than in the USA. In the Canadian election of 2000, the main challenger for the position of Federal Prime Minister was Stockwell Day, an evangelical Christian. He was vilified by the national press for allegedly believing that human beings once coexisted with dinosaurs. The then Prime Minister Chretien and several of his cabinet ministers protected themselves by claiming to be Catholic. Yet Chretien is an advocate of abortion and homosexual "rights" - both practices called sinful by his church. Nevertheless, he is adamant that church and state should be completely separated. Sadly, Mr. Day declared that his Pentecostal beliefs were no more relevant or deserving of scrutiny than his opponents!

Douglas Farrow, Professor at McGill University, Montreal, commented: "Imagine the furor had either Mr. Day or Mr. Chretien said that he believed that all true public authority was now vested by God in a crucified, resurrected and ascended Jew, and that, if elected to political service, he would attempt to serve this Jew to the best of his ability by pursuing a sound and merciful exercise of justice for all the people within the Canadian dominion!"

The post- September 11 memorial service in Ottawa in 2001 clearly demonstrated the victory of secularism in Canada, the total privatization and individualizing of the Christian faith. Prime Minister Chretien, whose name means Christian, ordered the memorial service to be conducted without any reference to God. It was in stark contrast to the memorial services in Washington held in a Cathedral. The Rev. Dr. Billy Graham preached the sermon. The President of the USA delivered a speech, which clearly showed he was not ashamed of the Gospel.

The present situation amounts to a fundamental reversal of Christ's ascension and Kingship. The danger is great that by refusing to recognize the Kingship of Christ over the state, the state will take on a demonic character (cf. Rev 13). Christians, servants of the ascended Lord and King, Jesus Christ, have a calling to bear witness to Him in private and public life. To serve Him in every sphere of life, including politics and social-economic life, also in the sciences and the arts is our task and privilege. Wherever we are placed in life, we are to seek the glory and honour of our King, Who is still in heaven. In our culture in decay, we need more than a private faith to carry us through our daily struggle. We need a wholehearted commitment to the Lord in every sphere of our lives. The everyday activity of ordinary Christians has indeed deep religious meaning. The English poet George Herbert expressed this insight so well:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see;
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee.

This is the kind of obedient witness in imitation of Christ that will be tested by martyrdom - whether social, political and if necessary even unto death.

Conclusion

The more a Christian knows and understands the great ascension theme, the more he realizes there is so much more to be known. Although we may not fully understand the doctrine of the ascension, it still is a comforting and challenging truth. Nowadays, it seems that the powers of this world have the final word. On the surface, we can't find many signs of Christ's Kingship. Presidents, prime ministers, generals, dictators may think they are in charge, but they are wrong. The Bible teaches us not to fear the powers of this world but the One Who sits at the right hand of God the Father. We may put all our trust in Him and serve Him. John Calvin's comments on the Apostles' Creed's clause "He ascended into heaven" are an appropriate conclusion:

Carried up into heaven, therefore, he withdrew his bodily presence from our sight, not to cease to be present with believers still on their earthly pilgrimage, but to rule heaven and earth with more immediate power...As his body was raised up above the heavens, so his power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth.

Johan D. Tangelder
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