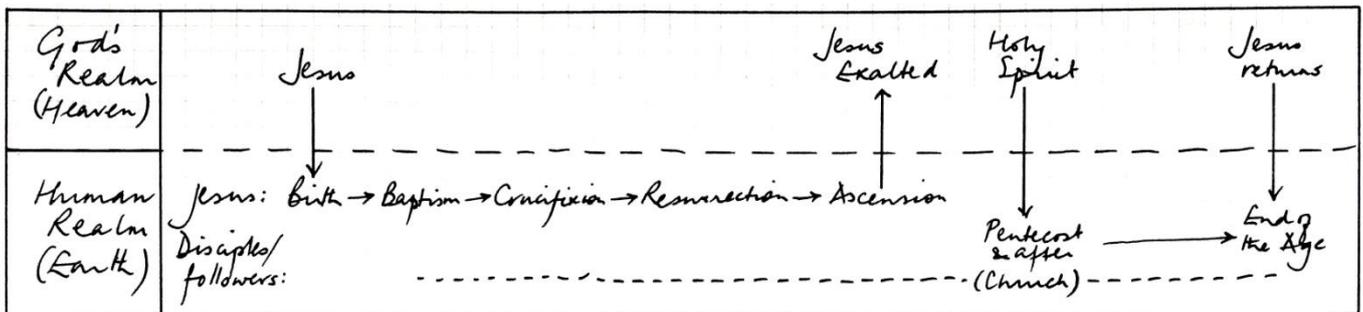


THE ASCENSION **OF JESUS CHRIST**

Why does the ascension matter?

- Marks the end of Jesus' time on earth; and the return to God his Father in heaven.
- The inauguration of Jesus' exaltation with the promise of his return to earth at the end of time.
- For Luke the pivot between the disciples as followers of Jesus and the disciples acting on their own in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- For John the final phase with crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus' glorification.
- See Schematic diagram below:



- Unlike resurrection talks, not tackle Ascension initially by a direct consideration of Biblical witnesses; instead consider what beliefs about Jesus in Christian community after Ascension and work our way back.

Principal characteristics of early Christian beliefs about Jesus in the New Testament

- (1) Jesus died, rose and ascended as Israel's true Messiah (=Christ).
- (2) God exalted Jesus to sit at his right hand.
- (3) God gave Jesus power and authority over all creation.
- (4) 'Jesus is Lord.'
- (5) Jesus will return (soon) at the end of the age.
- Look at each of these in turn, starting with Paul's letters, then consider the other NT writings.

Jesus as Israel's true Messiah

- Israel's expectation of her Messiah involved (1) decisive victory over the occupying power (Rome); (2) rebuilding or cleansing of the Temple; (3) bring justice and peace of God to the whole world.
- What it certainly didn't involve was (1) humiliating execution at the hands of Rome; (2) an apparent attack, even if symbolic, on the Temple and its hierarchy; (3) suffering injustice and violence as part of (1).
- So how did Jesus' followers come to realise that Jesus was indeed the Messiah utterly different from expectations? And how did they, having seen what happened to Jesus

himself have the courage to proclaim him as such, drawing the attention they had fled from at Jesus' arrest back to themselves?

- Only possible answer relies on their belief in the resurrection of Jesus, coupled with root and branch redefinition of the nature of Israel's true Messiah - (1) not seeking a military victory over the Romans but confronting evil and its worst manifestation death and overcoming them; (2) redefining the Temple as the community of Jesus' followers; (3) establishing a new community throughout the world, no longer dependent on the heritage and customs of Israel.
- This process remarkably rapid and comprehensive - by time Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians he almost always describes Jesus as Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah (as we'll see in a moment).
- Redefinition involved was radical: for example the appropriation of the suffering servant passages in Isaiah (esp ch53) to explain the crucifixion; the cross itself seen not as a symbol of shame but of God's wisdom and power (eg 1 Corinthians 1:18), the ultimate confrontation of sin (2 Corinthians 5:21) and death (Ephesians 4:7-10, 1 Peter 3:18-22); the Temple now thought of as metaphor for the followers of Jesus (1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 2 Corinthians 6:16); the abandonment for non-Jews of most of the traditional Jewish defining characteristics (esp circumcision), and the active declaration of the Gospel to Gentiles - throughout Paul's letters and Acts.

Jesus exalted by God to God's right hand

- In Philippians 2:6-11 Paul uses what may be an earlier hymn of praise to Jesus including at v9 'God exalted Christ Jesus to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name'.
- This highest place, defined as God's right hand, is referred to in Romans 8:34, 2 Corinthians 6:7, Ephesians 1:20, Colossians 3:1.
- From later traditions Acts 5:31; Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22. Implied in John's compendium term 'glorifying' (eg John 17:5&15) and throughout Revelation.

Jesus given power and authority over all creation

- Not only is Jesus exalted at God's right hand, but all creation honours him. Philippians 2 continues, 'that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (v10-11).
- Familiarity with this passage may blunt its impact and the extraordinary claim being made here and elsewhere - eg 1 Corinthians 15:24-27 where death itself is vanquished (v26); Ephesians 1:22-23; Hebrews 2:6-8.

Jesus is Lord

- So far these early Christian claims remain in relationship with traditional Jewish beliefs, even if reinterpreted in startlingly new ways. We'll see in a moment how they were rooted in texts drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures.
- Now, with apparently simple claim 'Jesus is Lord', move into an area no Jew would have considered possible - in fact into two completely separate areas, both hard to grasp then, even if commonplace now.
- First, 'Jesus is Lord' a direct assault on the power of Rome. 'Caesar is Lord' was the undisputed assertion of the Roman Empire, rolling all its formidable conquering and brutal power into the single word 'Lord'. Every time the title 'Lord' was used (and used a lot in NT) Roman power was being subverted, and Jesus' superior authority proclaimed.
- Secondly, as if this assault on the secular power was not enough, the early Christians attributed another meaning to 'Lord'. Look at an English translation of the Hebrew Bible (our OT) - the description of God himself (YHWH) is often translated 'the Lord' recognising the Jewish refusal to use God's own name. From early on Christians conflated OT 'the Lord' with the newly invented title of Jesus 'Lord'. So, in shortest time imaginable, Jesus moved from being the crucified criminal, ironically named 'King of the Jews', to being God's Anointed One (Messiah=Christ), superior to the Roman Emperor,

and equal, in some senses, though clearly not all (see 1 Corinthians 15:27), to God himself.

- One of the implications of the last claim was the availability of many OT text to support the emerging Jesus-narrative (see below).
- To see how quickly this complex and unprecedented set of developments took place, look at the earliest NT book - Paul's 1 Thessalonians - and note all usages of Christ and Lord:

1 Thessalonians

1:1 ... in the Lord Jesus Christ.

1:3 ... in our Lord Jesus Christ.

1:6 ... imitators of us and of the Lord.

1:8 The Lord's message ...

2:6 As Apostles of Christ ...

2:14 ... which are in Christ Jesus.

2:15 ... who killed the Lord Jesus ...

2:19 ... in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ ...

3:2 ... spreading the Gospel of Christ ...

3:8 ... standing firm in the Lord.

3:11 ... God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ ...

3:12 May the Lord ...

3:13 ... when our Lord Jesus comes ,,,

4:1 ... urge you in the Lord Jesus ...

4:2 ... authority of the Lord Jesus.

4:15 According to the Lord's own word ... the coming of the Lord ...

4:16 For the Lord himself ...

4:17 ... meet the Lord in the air ... with the Lord for ever.

5:9 ...salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

5:18 ... God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

5:23 ... at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

5:27 I charge you before the Lord ...

5:28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

- Often description is 'the (our) Lord Jesus Christ' but the three words used almost interchangeably in twos and ones.

Jesus will return at the end of the age

- Note that it is always Jesus' return (not second coming) and expected soon.
- Here's the earliest description:
The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever.
(1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)
- The urgency is less in Paul's later letters:
For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father ... (1 Corinthians 15:22-24)
- Emphasis rather different in closing pages of Revelation but Jesus will still return:
'Look, I am coming soon. My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. (ch 22:12-14)

Initiating and explaining these transformed expectations

- As noted earlier, driving force behind this new thinking had to be the absolute belief in the resurrection of Jesus, first of the witnesses to it and then of converts to the Way.
- No doubt reinforced by experience of Holy Spirit at Pentecost and other times.

- And for Paul by his extraordinary vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus.
- It seems likely that, following the example of Jesus in Luke 24:27,44-47, the earliest Christians started to interrogate the (Hebrew) Scriptures to see what light they threw on their developing beliefs.
- The results of their research, reflection and inspiration shown in the frequent references to the OT in Paul's letters and the other NT texts. That this was foundational to the new understanding of salvation history shown in the simple belief that Paul 'received as of first importance' with its double stress on 'according to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).
- Already referred to the importance of the Suffering Servant passages (Isaiah 53 etc) in relation to the crucifixion and changed understanding of the Messiah (see Acts 3:18). In Peter's Pentecost speech he uses Psalm 16:8-11 to explain the resurrection of the 'Holy One' (Acts 2:24-28).
- Key text for Jesus' exaltation and authority over all was Daniel 7:13-14 (referred to by Jesus himself in Mark's account of his trial before the High Priest (14:62):
In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.
- For Jesus as Lord, many texts from Psalms and Isaiah were identified (eg Psalm 24:7, 68:18, 72:1-2, 8-12, 17; Isaiah 11:1, 4, 10, 42:1, 6) but the most frequently quoted of all was Psalm 110 (see eg Acts 2:34, 1 Corinthians 15:25):
The LORD says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.' The LORD will extend your mighty sceptre from Zion, saying, 'Rule in the midst of your enemies.' ... (v1-2)

What about the Ascension?

- In Resurrection talks considered post-resurrection appearances in detail. So far today looked at beliefs of early Church when Jesus no longer with them. Question that remains is: how did Jesus' risen body on earth get to sit at God's right hand in heaven? Or, how did the Ascension happen?
- Luke the only Gospel-writer to tackle this question directly - before considering his two accounts look briefly at Matthew and John - reticent but not entirely silent.
- At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commissioned his disciples in what was clearly a farewell speech (28:16-20); it ended 'Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' which implies being with them in a different way ie Ascension.
- John tackles the commissioning differently and places it before Jesus' arrest. Ch 17:1-5 ends with 'And now Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began'. The key words are 'in your presence', also implying Ascension, even though glorification probably embraces crucifixion and resurrection as well.
- Luke, with his declared aim of writing 'an orderly account' (1:3) would never have been satisfied with implication when had the accounts of eye-witnesses to investigate. So he gave us two versions, one at the end of his Gospel, the other at the start of Acts. Rather than the differences being a cause for concern, the positioning of the two versions should alert us to the major significance of the event in Luke's mind. Here they are in columnar format:

LUKE (ch 24)	ACTS (ch 1)
⁴⁵ Then Jesus opened the disciples' minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, 'This is what is written: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.	¹ In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period

<p>⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'</p> <p>⁵⁰When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.</p> <p>⁵²Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.</p>	<p>of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' ⁶ Then they gathered round him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷ He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'</p> <p>⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.</p> <p>¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'</p>
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- From this comparison, clear that the Gospel account is shorter, which is appropriate for a passage bringing the whole Gospel to a tidy, orderly end.
- Acts is more detailed, serving both as a recapitulation and as an introduction to this new book. Among the interesting additions are:
- v3 - *convincing proofs*: including the Emmaus road and appearance to the disciples.
- *forty days*: must be a reference back to Jesus' 40 days of temptation (Luke 4:1-13) and an indication that the devil had been overcome by the resurrection.
- v7 - *restore the kingdom to Israel?*: suggests the disciples still expected a traditional Messiah. Jesus doesn't answer the question directly but tells them what the future holds for them - the Holy Spirit and proclaiming the Gospel (this exchange reminiscent of Jesus' rebuke to Peter in John 21:22).
- v9 - *a cloud*: a reminder of God's involvement, as at the transfiguration (Luke 9:34) and in the OT.
- v10 - *two men in white*: As at the tomb (Luke 24:4).
- v11 - *this same Jesus ... will come back*: Note that there is no timescale, as this is in God's hands, as Jesus had already said (v7).
- One final point about traditional artistic representations of Jesus floating upwards into the sky. Many scholars including NT Wright suggest that first century Jews, no more than us, believed in heaven literally beyond the skies. It has always been a convenient metaphor for heaven and remains so today.

Why is the ascension so important for us?

- As we've seen in Luke's accounts it marks a major transition - from the time of Jesus being physically on earth to the time of his return to God while remaining present to his followers through the Holy Spirit.

- 1600 years ago St Augustine of Hippo started an Ascension Day sermon:
Today our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven; let our hearts ascend with him. Listen to the words of the Apostle: 'If you have risen with Christ, set your hearts on the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God; seek the things that are above, not the things that are on earth' [Colossians 3:1]. For just as he remained with us even after his Ascension, so we too are already in heaven with him, even though what is promised us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies. Christ is now exalted above the heavens, but he still suffers all the pains that we, the members of his body, have to bear ...
- More recently, Charles Wesley wrote the hymn *Hail the day that sees him rise*. The words are in the appendix below with a few notes. But the scheme of his original 10-verse hymn has the first 6 verses praising God and Jesus for the Ascension itself (full of the Biblical quotations we might expect) before concluding with the hopes of we who stand 'gazing up' to Jesus. Here are the three final verses:

*Grant, tho' parted from our sight,
High above yon azure height,
Grant our hearts may thither rise,
Following thee beyond the skies.*

*Ever upward let us move,
Wafted on the wings of love,
Looking when our Lord shall come,
Longing, gasping after home.*

*There we shall with thee remain,
Partners of thy endless reign,
There thy face unclouded see,
Find our heav'n of heav'ns in thee.*

- In terms of John's three aspects of Jesus' glorification, could summarise: Jesus' glorification was initiated by the crucifixion, made certain by the resurrection, and made permanent by the ascension.

APPENDIX - Hail the day that sees him rise (Charles Wesley 1739)

1 Hail the day that sees him rise,
Ravish'd from our wishful eyes;
Christ awhile to mortals giv'n,
Re-ascends his native heav'n!

2 There the pompous triumph waits,
"Lift your heads, eternal gates,
Wide unfold the radiant scene,
Take the King of Glory in!"

3 Circled round with angel powers,
Their triumphant Lord, and ours,
Conqueror over death and sin,
Take the King of Glory in!

4 Him tho' highest heaven receives,
Still he loves the earth he leaves;
Tho' returning to his throne,
Still he calls mankind his own.

5 See! He lifts his hands above!
See! He shews the prints of love!
Hark! His gracious lips bestow
Blessings on his church below!

6 Still for us his death he pleads;
Prevalent, he intercedes;
Near himself prepares our place,
Harbinger of human race.

7 Master, (will we ever say)
Taken from our head to-day;
See thy faithful servants, see!
Ever gazing up to thee.

8 Grant, tho' parted from our sight,
High above yon azure height,
Grant our hearts may thither rise,
Following thee beyond the skies.

9 Ever upward let us move,
Wafted on the wings of love,
Looking when our Lord shall come,
Longing, gasping after home.

10 There we shall with thee remain,
Partners of thy endless reign,
There thy face unclouded see,
Find our heav'n of heav'ns in thee!

Comments

Verse 1 sets the scene as we join the first disciples at the time of Jesus' ascension. *Ravish'd* means taken from sight and in this usage has no hint of the sexual overtones we might read into the word nowadays. *Wishful sight* reflects the disciples' *looking up towards heaven* (Acts 1:11). Line 3 emphasises the temporary nature of Christ's time in the world, line 4 that his permanent location is heaven.

Verses 2 and 3 are strongly informed by Psalm 24:7 & 9, not only in content (Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in), but also in structure with the repeated final line, *Take the King of Glory in*. *Pompous* in verse 2 line 1 meant *magnificent*, not *self-important*. *Triumph* conjures up the Roman spectacle of the victorious general returning home; Jesus' victory is made explicit in Colossians 2:15. Verse 2 line 3 (*Wide unfold ...*) and verse 3 lines 1-2 have echoes of the heavenly scenes around the throne in Revelation (eg 4:1-2; 5:11-12).

Highest heaven (verse 4 line 1) seems to imply a hierarchy of heavenly heights, emphasising not only the extent of Jesus' exaltation (see Ephesians 4:9-10; Hebrews 7:26), but the degree of separation from *the earth he leaves* (line 2). Yet his continuing connection with humanity overcomes this apparent distance, reflecting in a few words key elements of the farewell discourses in John's Gospel (eg 13:1).

Then in verse 5 Wesley inserts some down-to-earth imperatives: See! See! Hark! *Lifts his hands* in the traditional Ascension posture, mirroring the crucifixion. *The prints of love* - the evidence of resurrection offered to Thomas (John 20:27). Lines 3&4 describe how he puts into practice his nurturing of his followers (see Ephesians 4:11 and encouragement to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia in Revelation 2:8-11 and 3:7-13).

And while he does that, he continues also (verse 6 lines 1&2) to plead our case with God the Father (Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2). *Prevalent* means *Having prevailed* (over death and sin). *Prepares our place* reflects John 14:2-3 (*Where I am, there you may be also*). *Harbinger* means *forerunner* or *one who has gone before* (see Hebrews 6:20).

From verse 7, with its change of tone almost to a conversational style in line 1, the hymn takes us back imaginatively to our standing with the original disciples on the mountain (as in verse 1 line 2), and explores the implications of that for our lives. In simple terms it's about aligning our hearts towards our exalted Lord (verse 8 line 3) and looking forward singlemindedly to the time when we *find our heav'n of heav'ns* in him (verse 10 line 4).

Looking when our Lord shall come (verse 9 line 3) - see 1 Thessalonians 4:15. *Longing, gasping after home* (verse 9 line 4) - the intensity of feeling here reflects that of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:1-8.

Thy face unclouded see (verse 10 line 3) - see 2 Corinthians 3:12-18.