

The Ascension of the Lord



detail of "Ascension of Jesus" | John Singleton Copely, 1775 | Museum of Fine Arts, Boston | PD-US

In Liturgical Year C, the celebration of the Ascension offers an interesting combination of readings - each by the same author, St. Luke. The first reading for Sunday is taken from the first chapter of [Acts of the Apostles](#). The gospel reading is taken from [Luke 24](#). Both readings are here for your consideration.

⁴⁶ And he said to them, "Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day ⁴⁷ and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And (behold) I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." ⁵⁰ Then he led them (out) as far as Bethany, raised his hands, and blessed them. ⁵¹ As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. ⁵² They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple praising God. (Luke 24:46-53)

The Lucan gospel account almost mentions the Ascension as "by the way." The focus and intent of the gospel narrative serves as a commissioning. After several appearances to the disciples on Easter and the days following, now Jesus takes his final leave: *You are witnesses of these things*. They are to wait in Jerusalem until the coming of the Holy Spirit, but then they will be off to the ends of the earth.

In the "second volume" of Luke's work, he picks up the story of the now-commissioned Church with the same scene: the Ascension.

¹ In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught ² until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered,

appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the holy Spirit.” ⁶ When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹ When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. ¹⁰ While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. ¹¹ They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.” (Acts 1:1-11)

As you can see, the basic elements of the pericope are the same, but in *Acts* the theme of the Kingdom plays a more prominent part. Here also the commission is specific: *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* Their commission is global.

Introduction

Acts tells how Jesus' disciples received his Holy Spirit and continued his work after he ascended into heaven. Much of Acts is a travelogue, following the Christian missionaries, especially Paul, as they spread God's word outward from Jerusalem. Similarly, Luke's Gospel had put a unique stress on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51 to the end of the book.)

The Acts of the Apostles, the second volume of Luke's two-volume work, continues Luke's presentation of biblical history, describing how the salvation promised to Israel in the Old Testament and accomplished by Jesus has now under the guidance of the Holy Spirit been extended to the Gentiles. This was accomplished through the divinely chosen representatives (Acts 10:41) whom Jesus prepared during his historical ministry (Acts 1:21-22) and commissioned after his resurrection as witnesses to all that he taught (Acts 1:8; 10:37-43; Luke 24:48).

Yet Acts is not, per se, a history of the early Church. There are no detailed histories of the activities of most of the Apostles. While perhaps Luke's knowledge is limited - e.g. it would not have been practical to learn of Thomas' missionary activities in India. For St. Luke, his world is the Roman-Hellenistic realm, likely the world of his patron Theophilus. And so the main story lines are the primary evangelists of that world: Peter and Paul.

Peter was the leading member of the Twelve, a miracle worker like Jesus in the gospel (Acts 3:1-10; 5:1-11, 15; 9:32-35, 36-42), the object of divine care (Acts 5:17-21; 12:6-11), and the spokesman for the Christian community (Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43; 15:7-11), who, according to Luke, was largely responsible for the growth of the community in the early days (Acts 2:4; 4:4). Paul eventually joined the community at Antioch (Acts 11:25-26), which subsequently commissioned him and Barnabas to undertake the spread of the gospel to Asia Minor. This missionary venture generally failed to win broad acceptance to the gospel message among the Jews of the Mediterranean diaspora but enjoyed success among the Gentiles (Acts 13:14-14:27).

Paul's refusal to impose the Mosaic law upon his Gentile converts provoked very strong objection among the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1), but both Peter and James supported his

position (Acts 15:6-21). Paul's second and third missionary journeys (Acts 16:36-21:16) resulted in the same pattern of failure among the Jews generally but of some success among the Gentiles. Paul, like Peter, is presented as a miracle worker (Acts 14:8-18; 19:12; 20:7-12; 28:7-10) and the object of divine care (Acts 16:25-31).

In Acts, Luke has provided a broad survey of the church's development from the resurrection of Jesus to Paul's first Roman imprisonment, the point at which the book ends. In telling this story, Luke describes the emergence of Christianity from its origins in Judaism to its position as a religion of status and appeal in the Roman world and beyond. Originally a Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem, the church was placed in circumstances impelling it to include within its membership people of other cultures: the Samaritans (Acts 8:4-25), at first an occasional Gentile (Acts 8:26-30; 10:1-48), and finally the Gentiles on principle (Acts 11:20-21). Fear on the part of the Jewish people that Christianity, particularly as preached to the Gentiles, threatened their own cultural heritage caused them to be suspicious of Paul's gospel (Acts 13:42-45; 15:1-5; 28:17-24). The inability of Christian missionaries to allay this apprehension inevitably created a situation in which the gospel was preached more and more to the Gentiles. Toward the end of Paul's career, the Christian communities, with the exception of those in Palestine itself (Acts 9:31), were mainly of Gentile membership. In tracing the emergence of Christianity from Judaism, Luke is insistent upon the prominence of Israel in the divine plan of salvation (Acts 2:5-6; 3:13-15; 10:36; 13:16-41; 24:14-15) and that the extension of salvation to the Gentiles has been a part of the divine plan from the beginning (Acts 15:13-18; 26:22-23).

In the development of the church from a Jewish Christian origin in Jerusalem, with its roots in Jewish religious tradition, to a series of Christian communities among the Gentiles of the Roman empire, Luke perceives the action of God in history laying open the heart of all humanity to the divine message of salvation. His approach to the history of the church is motivated by his theological interests. His history of the apostolic church is the story of a Spirit-guided community and a Spirit-guided spread of the Word of God. The travels of Peter and Paul are in reality the travels of the Word of God as it spreads from Jerusalem, the city of destiny for Jesus, to Rome, the capital of the civilized world of Luke's day. Nonetheless, the historical data he utilizes are of value for the understanding of the church's early life and development and as general background to the Pauline epistles. In the interpretation of Acts, care must be exercised to determine Luke's theological aims and interests and to evaluate his historical data without either exaggerating their literal accuracy or underestimating their factual worth.

Finally, an apologetic concern is evident throughout Acts. By stressing the continuity between Judaism and Christianity (Acts 13:16-41; 23:6-9; 24:10-21; 26:2-23), Luke argues that Christianity is deserving of the same toleration accorded Judaism by Rome. Part of Paul's defense before Roman authorities is to show that Christianity is not a disturber of the peace of the Roman Empire (Acts 24:5, 12-13; 25:7-8). Moreover, when he stands before Roman authorities, he is declared innocent of any crime against the empire (Acts 18:13-15; 23:29; 25:25-27; 26:31-32). Luke tells his story with the hope that Christianity will be treated fairly.

The principal divisions of the Acts of the Apostles are the following:

- The Preparation for the Christian Mission (Acts 1:1-2:13)
- The Mission in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-8:3)
- The Mission in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:4-9:43)
- The Inauguration of the Gentile Mission (Acts 10:1-15:35)
- The Mission of Paul to the Ends of the Earth (Acts 15:36-28:31)

Commentary

The Church's Mission Begins

Luke begins Acts as he begins his Gospel, with a foreword to his patron Theophilus, reminding him that the “first book” covered the time until Jesus was taken up by God to heaven. The Gospel ends with a brief reference to this incident (Luke 24:51), which was preceded by important teaching given by Jesus to his disciples. So important was this teaching that we have three accounts of it. Luke records it in the Gospel (Luke 24, especially in verses 44–49); he then summarizes it briefly in this introductory part of Acts, and then he covers certain aspects of it once again in the story of the ascension which is the first incident in the main narrative in Acts (1:6–11). The repetition is partly for emphasis, and at the same time it indicates that the period from Easter Sunday to the Ascension is both the conclusion of the earthly ministry of Jesus and the beginning of the work of the church. This period had two important characteristics. It provided evidence that Jesus was alive (1:3), having risen from the dead, and it was the time when Jesus gave his mission orders to the apostles (1:4f.; *cf.* 1:7f.).

Jesus had prepared his apostles for their mission by instructing them during his lifetime. He also appeared to them some forty days after his death and resurrection. The forty days seem the same kind of round number as Jesus’ forty days and Moses’ forty years in the desert (Luke 4:1–2 and Exodus). The difference between the ending of Luke’s Gospel and the beginning of Acts does not seem to have bothered Luke. The Gospel treated the ascension as the last event on Easter Day. Acts dates it forty days later.

The disagreements imply that Luke was less concerned with the date of the Ascension than with its importance as the event that closed the series of Jesus’ resurrection appearances (except the extraordinary appearance to Paul; compare 1 Cor 15:5–9). Each passage has its own theological message. The Gospel ends with Jesus’ priestly blessing as he ascends (Luke 24:51). Acts compares the ascension to Jesus’ return from heaven (1:11).

Luke also stresses that the risen Jesus gave the apostles convincing signs that he was alive after his death. He appeared several times and continued teaching them what God’s kingdom meant. Since they both saw and heard Jesus risen from the dead, they could be genuine witnesses to his resurrection. Others had only hearsay knowledge about Jesus (e.g., Herod in Luke 9:7–9). Throughout his Gospel and Acts, Luke emphasizes how important it is to both see and hear Jesus. See how Luke contrasts Paul with his companions in Acts 9:3–7.

Luke also underscores how Jesus gave new insights to his disciples after his resurrection. The risen Jesus would give the same kind of instruction to Paul in Acts 9.

The same Holy Spirit who was with Jesus when he chose and instructed the apostles would now be given to them. Both Luke’s Gospel and Acts emphasize that being “baptized by the Holy Spirit” is the way God’s power is given to humans. The Spirit came upon Jesus and thus began Jesus’ mission of preaching and healing (Luke 3:21–22). At Pentecost the same Spirit would be given to the apostles to begin their preaching and healing in Acts. Receiving God’s powerful Spirit far surpasses the effects of John’s baptism, which had merely used water as a sign of repentance (Acts 11:15–17).

Usually in Acts people receive the Spirit when they are baptized as Christians, like the followers of John the Baptist in Acts 19:1–7. But at the very beginning of Christianity, God gave his Spirit to the apostles at Pentecost and to the Gentiles in Acts 10–11 before anyone could give them Christian baptism with water and the Spirit.

These accounts are meant to show how Christianity began by God's free action, independent of any human cooperation or ritual. The church is not just some human sect, but comes directly from God. The gift of the Spirit which began the church fulfills the Father's promises in the Old Testament, as Jesus had explained them.

Jesus, taken up into heaven (1:6–11). Although we have titled this section 'The Ascension', it seems the actual act of ascension is the central feature in the story yet Luke seems more concerned with what was said than with what happened. The vital question was the one posed by the disciples: now that Jesus had been raised from the dead, was God going to complete his purpose by finally establishing his rule?

The answer given was twofold. First, the time of this event remained God's secret; what was more important was the immediate task of the disciples which was to act as witnesses to Jesus from Jerusalem to the end of the earth. The spread of God's rule was to take place by means of the disciples, empowered by the Spirit. This was the final command of Jesus before he left the disciples. Secondly, the departure of Jesus was interpreted as a pattern for his ultimate return to the earth to inaugurate the final establishment of the rule of God. These verses spell out God's purpose and the place of the church in it. They postulate that the period of witness and mission must precede the return of Jesus. They were thus in effect a warning to the disciples not to expect a speedy winding up of history. For Luke's readers some forty or more years later they were a reminder of an ongoing task: the gospel must still be taken to the end of the earth. At the same time the words contain a note of promise in that the departure of Jesus is compensated for by the coming of the Spirit, given by Jesus himself (2:33).

The question about restoring the rule to Israel in 1:6 also shows continued misunderstanding about what the kingdom of God meant. Acts 2:3 will show that God's promise was about the coming of the Holy Spirit, not an earthly empire. The prohibition against trying to compute the times of the end is meant to discourage Luke's readers from guessing what cannot be known. Rather, they should focus on the power of the Spirit as the sign of living in the promised final days. Luke says Christians are to use this power during whatever time is left to witness to Jesus to the ends of the earth. They should not waste energy trying to figure out when the end of the world will be.

Verse 1:8 provides a "table of contents" for Acts. The witness "in Jerusalem" is Acts 2 to 7. "Throughout Judea and Samaria" is from chapters 8 to 12, and to "the ends of the earth" from Acts 13 to 28. "The ends of the earth" is an echo of Isa 49:6 (*"I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."* – quoted explicitly in Acts 13:47)) Both Acts and the Psalms of Solomon, a slightly earlier non-Biblical Jewish writing, apply the phrase "the ends of the earth" to Rome. Acts ends in Rome. And Pss Sol 8:15 calls the Roman general Pompey "him that is from the end of the earth." Of course, it can simply mean the whole of the world, even beyond Rome.

Acts 1:9 mentions that the disciples saw Jesus actually being taken up to heaven to remind readers of 2 Kgs 2:4–15. There, the prophet Elijah told his disciple Elisha that only if he saw Elijah being taken up to heaven would he receive double Elijah's portion of the Holy Spirit. Elisha did see the flaming chariot take up Elijah and therefore received the same Spirit as Elijah. So in Acts 1:9, the disciples saw Jesus being taken up in a cloud and received Jesus' Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The disciples are portrayed as looking intently into the sky as Jesus disappears, a detail which suggests that they are longing for the reappearance of Jesus or some other happening which will indicate that what they have seen is not the final act in the drama. Their unspoken prayer is answered by the appearance of two figures dressed in white. The description is that of angels (Luke

24:4; Acts 10:30) who wear bright, shining clothes. Their function is to give a commentary on what has happened. They ask the disciples why they are gazing into heaven; the question is an implicit reproach of them for dawdling there and longing for Jesus to remain with them. Already the disciples have had a command as to what they are to do. Now they are given an assurance that the ascension of Jesus is a guarantee that, as it was possible for Jesus to ascend into heaven, so it will be possible for him to return in the same way, i.e. on a cloud at the parousia (Luke 21:27; Mark 14:62; cf. Dan. 7:13). Thus the promise of the parousia forms the background of hope against which the disciples are to act as the witnesses to Jesus. In effect the present passage corresponds to Jesus' statement in Mark 13:10 that the gospel must first be preached to all nations before the end can come.

Notes

Acts 1:1 *Theophilus*: The name means 'dear to God', but it is doubtless the real name of a real person and not just a symbolical name. The omission of the courteous 'most excellent' used in Luke 1:3 is quite natural at the second occurrence of the name. Theophilus was probably already a Christian, and Luke wrote his book to help him and others like him to have a reliable account of the beginnings of Christianity.

Acts 1:3 *He presented himself alive to them by many proofs*: Jesus showed that he was alive by appearing to his disciples on several occasions. The stress lies on the factuality of the evidence, as we have it in the stories in Luke 24 where the initial unwillingness of the disciples to believe that Jesus was risen was overcome by the clear evidence presented to them. Nor did their conviction rest on one single experience, but rather on repeated pieces of proof. Although in Luke 24 the resurrection appearances of Jesus are presented as if they all took place on Easter Sunday, here Luke relates that they happened over an extended period of forty days.

***appearing to them during forty days*:** Luke considered especially sacred the interval in which the appearances and instructions of the risen Jesus occurred and expressed it therefore in terms of the sacred number forty (cf Deut 8:2). In his gospel, however, Luke connects the ascension of Jesus with the resurrection by describing the ascension on Easter Sunday evening (Luke 24:50-53). What should probably be understood as one event (resurrection, glorification, ascension, sending of the Spirit--the paschal mystery) has been historicized by Luke when he writes of a visible ascension of Jesus after forty days and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. For Luke, the ascension marks the end of the appearances of Jesus except for the extraordinary appearance to Paul. With regard to Luke's understanding of salvation history, the ascension also marks the end of the time of Jesus (Luke 24:50-53) and signals the beginning of the time of the church.

Acts 1:4 *while meeting with them*: The word used, *synalizaomai*, is unusual and has led to another of alternative translations including: "sharing a meal" or "eating with" as well as "staying with" or "lodging with." For all alternatives there is textual and linguistic support. The primary meaning in Koine Greek is simply "meeting."

***the promise of the Father*:** the holy Spirit, as is clear from the next verse. This gift of the Spirit was first promised in Jesus' final instructions to his chosen witnesses in Luke's gospel (Luke 24:49; see also Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13 in the NT; Isa 32:15 and Joel 2:28-32 in OT) and formed part of the continuing instructions of the risen Jesus on the kingdom of God, of which Luke speaks in Acts 1:3.

***about which you have heard me speak*:** When did the disciples hear this promise from Jesus himself? One possibility is that Luke 24:49 is in mind, but it is more likely that the present verse is a recapitulation of the saying in the Gospel, expressed in slightly different wording. We should, therefore, think perhaps of such teaching about the coming of the Spirit as we find in Matthew

10:20 (cf. Luke 12:12) and John 14–16.

Acts 1:5 *John baptized with water... baptized with the holy Spirit*: Jesus' promise is strengthened by a reminder of the testimony of John the Baptist; he had claimed to baptize merely with water, but prophesied the coming of One who would baptize with the Spirit (Luke 3:16), and Jesus now alludes to this statement (cf. Peter's citation of these words of Jesus in 11:16). To baptize literally means to immerse a person in water or to deluge him with it, usually as a means of cleansing. When the term is applied to the Spirit, it appears to refer to the pouring out of the Spirit from on high by God and is associated with the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). But the metaphor of pouring out a liquid is ultimately inadequate to do justice to the gift of the Spirit who comes to God's people, bringing power, wisdom and joy; as a result the term 'baptism' is considerably widened in its metaphorical use, and no one synonym can do justice to its range of meaning as a Christian technical term for the reception of the Spirit.

Acts 1:6 *Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to (for) Israel*: It would be very natural to wonder whether these marked the beginning of the last stage in God's plan. This may reflect the Jewish hope that God would establish his rule in such a way that the people of Israel would be freed from their enemies (especially the Romans) and established as a nation to which other peoples would be subservient. If so, the disciples would appear here as representatives of those of Luke's readers who had not yet realized that Jesus had transformed the Jewish hope of the kingdom of God from one focused on earthly dominion. Another possibility is that Luke's readers might think that the 'times of the Gentiles', during which Jerusalem was to be desolate, ought now to be coming to an end and giving place to the coming of the kingdom (Luke 21:24, 31); in this case there would be a secondary interpretation of the disciples' question in terms of the expectations of Luke's readers. It is less likely that the question is in effect whether the coming of the Spirit is to be interpreted as the restoration of the kingdom. Rather, we have a question about how soon the end is to come, which was natural enough in the context of the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

Acts 1:7 *It is not for you to know....*: This verse echoes the tradition that the precise time of the parousia is not revealed to human beings; cf Mark 13:32; 1 Thes 5:1-3.

Acts 1:8 *you will be my witnesses*: This should be seen as echoing or paralleling the frequent references to Isaiah's hearers in their role as the Lord's servant acting as witnesses to him (Isa. 43:10, 12; 44:8). In Isaiah the role is a fairly general one of witness to God, his reality, power, and ability to announce beforehand what he is going to do; in Acts the witness is more specifically to the career of Jesus and in particular his resurrection (e.g., 2:32). The theme of witness is prominent throughout Acts, being applied to Peter and his colleagues and to Paul.

***Jerusalem*:** Just as Jerusalem was the city of destiny in the Gospel of Luke (the place where salvation was accomplished), so here at the beginning of Acts, Jerusalem occupies a central position. It is the starting point for the mission of the Christian disciples to "the ends of the earth," the place where the apostles were situated and the doctrinal focal point in the early days of the community (Acts 15:2, 6).

***the ends of the earth*:** cf. Isa 49:16. If one places a strong city/geographical accent upon Acts – as Luke clearly does in his gospel, the for Luke, "the ends of the earth" means Rome.

Acts 1:9 *as they were looking on, he was lifted up*: Luke alone describes the ascension of Jesus as a visible event, although the fact of the ascension is firmly attested elsewhere (1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 3:21f.), especially in the many passages where the resurrection of Jesus is understood to be not simply his raising from death but also his exaltation to the right hand of God (2:33–35).

Acts 1:10 two men: While the majority of interpreters suggest “angels”, there are scholars who interestingly propose that the two men represent Jesus’ two predecessors, Moses and Elijah, who also ascended and who were witnesses at the Transfiguration.

Sources

William S. Kurz, “The Acts of the Apostles” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989)

I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, in *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Volume 5, General Editor: Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL :InterVarsity Press, 1980)

Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995)

G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007)

Scripture quotes from *New American Bible* by Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. © 1991, 1986, 1970 at www.usccb.org/nab/bible/index.shtml