

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.

Commentary

From the earliest times in the church, there was a danger of docetism, the heretical belief that Jesus was God behind a thin veneer of humanity: thus his suffering was only playacting, and his resurrection was simply a return to a completely spiritual existence with no bodily effect. The Letters of John combated this error (1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 7). The narrative which precedes our passage stresses that Jesus’ resurrection body is real. The disciples touch him; the marks of the passion are visible in his hands and feet; he eats with the disciples.

Even though they have already heard about the earlier appearance. They are still excited and tense with the unfamiliarity of it all, and Jesus suddenly appears in their midst. His question to them is rhetorical, a way of introducing the Scriptural instruction that will help them to assimilate the truth of this marvelous event. The Old Testament is referred to in a traditional way by naming its three collections: law, prophets, and psalms (usually “writings”) – Luke 24:44. His words commissioning them as witnesses of his resurrection foreshadow the Acts of the Apostles. The “promise” of the Father is the Holy Spirit who will be given to empower them to fulfill their mission (Acts 1:8).

As mentioned above, there is no previous reference to “the *promised of my Father*” in Luke, but there various references to the Spirit, especially at the beginning of the Gospel (cf. 1;15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-26; 3:16, 22; 4:1; 10:21). Note also that “Spirit” is not mentioned in all verses -- but power (*dynamis*) from on high is clearly indicated (cf. v.49).

- John the Baptist came in the "spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the people for the Lord (1:17).
- The power of the Most High came upon Mary (1:35).
- Jesus returned from his temptation in the power of the Spirit (4:14).
- Jesus exhibited authority and power over the evil spirits (4:36)
- Jesus heals by the power of the Lord (5:17; 6:19; 8:46)
- Jesus gave the Twelve power and authority over demons and diseases (9:1)
- The enemy also has power, which the Twelve have been given authority over (10:19)
- Jesus does deeds of power which produces praise from the multitude of disciples (19:37)

- The disciples received power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8)
- The disciples are able to perform healings and miracles by this power (Acts 3:12; 6:8; 8:13; 19:11)
- They preach boldly with this power (Acts 4:7, 33)

The gift of power is related to being witnesses of these things – not only to experience them, but to spread the experience to others.

Luke's Gospel ends with the fulfillment of the journey begun in 9:51 (see Acts 1:2). It is surprising to find two contradictory dates of the ascension by the same author. Here the Ascension takes place on the day of resurrection; in Acts, it takes place forty days later (Acts 1:3, 9). One explanation is that the accounts vary because Luke treats the same event from two points of view: in the Gospel the Ascension is the climax of Jesus' work; in Acts it is the prelude to the church's mission.

The Ascension as the exaltation of Jesus as the risen Lord at the right hand of the Father took place immediately as part of the resurrection triumph, but his visible leave-taking of the community happened at some later time. Theologians also see in the Ascension the taking into heaven of the humanity of Jesus. The Incarnation is not something casual and fleeting but a divine action with permanent consequences. If the Ascension means the taking of Christ's humanity into heaven, it means that with it will be taken the humanity which He has redeemed—those who are Christ's, at His coming. It is a powerful expression of the redemption of this world, in contrast to mere escape from it.

The gospel location of these events is at Bethany on the far side of the Mount of Olives, which lies east of Jerusalem. Jesus' blessing indicates his handing on of the mission to the disciples and his promise of assistance as they carry it out. The whole scene is reminiscent of the blessing by the priest in Sir 50:20–21 (see also John 20:21–23). The Greek word for "homage" or "worship" (v. 52) is used for the first time in the Gospel for reverence toward Jesus (earlier it was given to God the Father: 4:7–8). This is appropriate as the cross and resurrection has revealed his divinity.

The Gospel ends in the temple, where it began. Christianity at this point is still understood as the fulfillment of Jewish promises within Israel, not something radically separate from Judaism. The first Christians are faithful Jews. Their mission is still within Judaism (Acts 1–7) until they are led beyond under the Spirit's guidance. The disciples are not despondent at the departure of Jesus (compare John 14:1). They are full of joy, understanding the fulfillment of Jesus' mission and awaiting the gift he has promised.

Notes

Luke 24:46 *that the Messiah should suffer*: Luke is the only New Testament writer to speak explicitly of a suffering Messiah (Luke 24:26,46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23). The idea of a suffering Messiah is not found explicitly in the Old Testament or in other Jewish literature prior to the New Testament period, although the idea is hinted at in Mark 8:31–33.

Luke 24:47 *repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations*: Jesus had indicated how Scripture was fulfilled in his passion and resurrection (road to Emmaus). Now he indicates Scripture being fulfilled in the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins. In *his name* connects this repentance and forgiveness with what Jesus is and has done. People are not called to a repentance based on general principles and to a forgiveness always available. Luke is speaking about what Christ has done for people and what is available through him. This Evangelist's universalism comes out in his reference to all nations. It is no forgiveness available for a few pious or nationalistic souls, but for all people.

Luke 24:49 *the promise of my Father*: i.e., the gift of the holy Spirit. The risen Jesus has the power to send the Spirit. The disciples are not to attempt the task of evangelism with their own meager resources, but are to await the coming of the Spirit.

clothed with power from on high: The note of power is significant, and *on high* reminded them (and reminds us) of the source of all real power for mission.

Luke 24:51 *taken up to heaven*: Luke brings his story about the time of Jesus to a close with the report of the Ascension. He will also begin the story of the time of the church with a recounting of the Ascension. In the gospel, Luke recounts the Ascension of Jesus on Easter Sunday night, thereby closely associating it with the resurrection. In Acts 1:3,9–11; 13:31 he writes of a forty-day period between the resurrection and the ascension. The Western text (manuscript) omits some phrases in Luke 24:51,52 perhaps to avoid any chronological conflict with Acts 1 about the time of the ascension.

Luke 24:52 *Jerusalem*: The notion that the beginning of the messianic age will be noticeable first in Jerusalem, where the good news of repentance and the forgiveness of sins is first proclaimed (24:47), indicates a reversal of the direction assumed by the OT promises concerning the conversion of the Gentiles in the last days (Isa. 2:2–5 [Mic. 4:1–4]; 14:2; 45:14; 49:22–23; 55:5; 66:20; Jer. 16:19–21; Zeph. 3:9–10; Zech. 8:20–23; 14:16–19). Whereas the Jews expected the nations to come from “outside” to Jerusalem as the center of the world, Jesus tells his disciples that they will begin in Jerusalem and then move out to the nations.

Sources

Jerome Kodell, “Luke” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989)

Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, in *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Volume 3, General Editor: Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL :InterVarsity Press, 1988)

Brian Stoffregen, CrossMarks Christian Resources at www.crossmarks.com/brian/

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