Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross

Image credit: Moses and the Brazen Serpent | Esteban March (1610-1668) | Banco Santander Collection, Madrid | PD-US

Historical Background

September 14th is the date established for a feast that recognizes the Cross as the instrument upon which our salvation was won by Jesus Christ. This feast is called in Greek Ὕψωσις τοῦ Τιμίου καὶ Ζωοποιοῦ Σταυροῦ ("Raising Aloft of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross") and in Latin *Exaltatio Sanctae Crucis*. In English, the 3rd Edition of the Roman Missal restored the traditional name, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, replacing the 1972 nomenclature of the Triumph of the Cross.

When the feast day falls on a Sunday (e.g. 2014 and 2025) it replaces the Sunday celebration of Ordinary Time.

According to tradition, the True Cross was discovered in 326 by Saint Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, during a pilgrimage she made to Jerusalem. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was then built at the site of the discovery, by order of Helena and Constantine. The church was dedicated nine years later, with a portion of the cross placed inside it. Other traditions explain that in 614, that portion of the cross was carried away from the church by the Persians, and remained missing until it was recaptured by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius in 628. Initially taken to Constantinople, the cross was returned to the church the following year.

The date of the feast marks the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in 335. This was a two-day festival: although the actual consecration of the church was on September 13, the cross itself was brought outside the church on September 14 so that the clergy and faithful could pray before the True Cross, and all could come forward to venerate it.

The Readings

The gospel reading for this feast is John 3:13-17 which is an integral part of a much larger narrative. John 3:1-21 comprises a single, cohesive scene within the Johannine narrative and ideally should be studied as

a single pericope – but this Sunday we glance at only a small portion that forms a capstone-like statement of the role of Jesus in our salvation. And that small passage needs to be understood in the context of the first reading from Numbers 21 when Moses raises the Bronze Serpent in the wilderness.

Raising the Bronze Serpent

The first reading today is from the Book of Numbers 21:4-9:

> *With their patience worn out by the journey, the people complained against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!" In punishment the LORD sent among the people saraph serpents, which bit the people so that many of them died. Then the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned in complaining against the LORD and you. Pray the LORD to take the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people, and the LORD said to Moses, "Make a saraph and mount it on a pole, and if any who have been bitten look at it, they will live." Moses accordingly made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole, and whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. (Nb 21:4-9)*

The Book of Numbers is the title of the book in English, but the Hebrew title is, more commonly, *bemiḏbar*, "in the wilderness [of]"). "In the wilderness" describes the contents of the book much better than "numbers," which is derived from the censuses described in later chapters. Our passage occurs after God has assigned them to wander in the desert for a generation because of their rebellion against the leadership of God. They seem to have to fight their way through the wilderness.

In the midst of this larger narrative, the Israelites have just won a military victory but still clear of the Edomites as they navigate towards the promised land. Along the way, the exigencies of life in the desert once again caused them to complain – and not for the first time. Even in the face of victories the Israelites' basic character has not changed. They complain against both God and Moses because of a lack of acceptable water and food. Once more these people show themselves to be out of touch with reality as they long for Egypt and talk as if they had a choice about dying in the wilderness (cf. 11:4–6; 14:2–4). In previous times complaints about food had brought a divine supply of their needs (11:4–35), but now the response of God is to send a scourge of fiery serpents that kills many people. Again as before, the Israelites repent (11:2; 12:11; 14:40) and ask Moses to intercede with Yahweh (11:2; 12:11–13). When he does, God instructs him to construct a copper image of one of the lethal snakes and to set it on a pole where it can be seen. No one is saved from being bitten, but if one is bitten and chooses to obey God by looking at the copper snake, one will be cured from the lethal effects of the bite.

There is much speculation about the snake ("fiery" likely because of the burning associated with its bite) and why mounting a copper image of it is the means of cure. There is no firm agreement, but here is at least one interesting speculation. The people were "threatening" to return to Egypt, turning away from God towards evil. The Egyptian god Apep (also Apophasis) was the evil god who lost in battle to the sun god Re. Apep was the god of death, darkness and an opponent of light – and interestingly, was also the god of medicine and healing. But there was one catch: worshippers were not to look upon the snake god. To raise their eyes and look on the snake was to receive the judgment of death from Apep and know eternal darkness. To keep one's eyes cast down in worship was to know healing.

The command from Moses for those who had been bitten – and presumably guilty of turning away from God – was to look upon their snake god. They were facing certain death from the snake bit and knew that only the true God would save them. If they had faith in Yahweh and looked upon the image of the snake who was no god at all, they were healed: "*anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze*

serpent, he lived." If they refused to admit their guilt and kept their eyes cast downward in false worship, then they died, ironically suffering the very opposite fate that their former worship promised.

During the Communion Rite of Mass over the years I have noticed that when the priest elevates the consecrated host and chalice then says, "*Behold the Lamb of God…*" In a good and true sign of reverence many Catholics bow their heads. But then the liturgical command is "*Behold*" meaning "see, gaze upon, observe." It is a time in the Mass when we are to raise our eyes to the Lamb of God and see in the Holy Eucharist the One who, raised up on the cross, has rescued and redeemed us from the wilderness of our sins.

Lifted up to Eternal Life

In John's Gospel, the sacred writer clearly echoes the scene from Numbers 21, our first reading. As mentioned, our gospel reading is taken from a larger passage (John 3:1-21). If you would like to read the longer commentary on the larger passage, you can find it here.

Picking up the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus in John 3, we hear

> *[11] Amen, amen, I say to you, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. [12] If I tell you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? [13] No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. [14] And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."*

The significance of the ascension of the Son of Man is elaborated through an OT example (Num 21:8-9). The key to interpreting this analogy between Moses' lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness and the ascension of the Son of Man is the verb (*hypsoō*), meaning both "lift up" and "exalt." (The Hebrew verb *nāsā'* has a similar double meaning; see the pun based on this verb in Gen 40:9-23.) Once again the Fourth Evangelist asks the reader to hold two meanings together simultaneously. As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross. The double meaning of *hypsoō* implies, however, that the physical act of lifting up is also a moment of exaltation. That is, it is in the crucifixion that Jesus is exalted. John 3:14 is one of three statements about the "lifting up" of the Son of Man in John (see also 8:28; 12:32-34). These three sayings are the Johannine analogue to the three passion predictions in the synoptic Gospels (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33.34; and parallels).

The overlap of crucifixion and exaltation conveyed by v. 14 is crucial to Johannine understanding of salvation, because the Fourth Evangelist understands Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as one continuous event. Verse 14 also contains a key to the theological grounding of the Evangelist's attraction to irony; the cross as humiliation is actually exaltation. This will become especially clear in the crucifixion narrative of John 18-19. The Fourth Gospel is often criticized for having an inadequate theology of the cross, but such criticism misconstrues the Johannine treatment of the crucifixion. As v. 14 makes clear, there is no exaltation apart from the crucifixion for John.

The overlap of crucifixion/exaltation also provides the context for interpreting the role of the ascent/descent language in v. 13 (and 1:51) and the Fourth Evangelist's use of the title "Son of Man." The Fourth Evangelist appropriates the traditional apocalyptic figure of the Son of Man (cf. Dan. 7:13) and invests it with his christological perspective. Ascent/descent language thus speaks of Jesus' relationship to God and to the world. The Son of Man's ascent to heaven is salvific, because he is the one who has descended from heaven, the very one whom the Prologue celebrates.

John 3:15 makes explicit the salvific dimension of the crucifixion. Jesus' offer of his life through being lifted up on the cross makes "eternal life" (*zōēn aiōnion*) possible for those who believe. "Eternal life" is one of the dominant metaphors in the Fourth Gospel to describe the change in human existence wrought

by faith in Jesus (e.g., 3:36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:27; 17:4). To have eternal life is to live life no longer defined by blood or by the will of the flesh or by human will, but by God (cf. 1:13). "Eternal" does not mean mere endless duration of human existence, but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God. To speak of the newness available to the believer as "eternal life" shifts eschatological expectations to the present. Eternal life is not something held in abeyance until the believer's future, but begins in the believer's present. The focus on the crucifixion in 3:13-15 provides the key to interpreting Jesus' earlier metaphors of new birth and the kingdom of God. The offer of new life, "to be born anal-hen," has only one source—Jesus' offer of his own life. The cross thus makes sense of the double meaning of *anōthen*: To be born from above is to be born again through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross. (See note below for explanation)

God so loved the world…

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

Verse 16 provides the link between the two parts of the discourse. It sums up vv. 14-15 by reiterating the salvific dimensions of Jesus' death, but moves the argument forward with its reference to God's love. God gave Jesus to the world because God loves the world.

The verb translated "give" (*didōmi*) is regularly used in the Fourth Gospel to describe God as the source of what Jesus offers the world (3:35; 5:22, 26, 36). John 3:16 is the only place in the Fourth Gospel that says God "gave" his Son to the world; the more common expression is that God "sent" Jesus, as in 3:17. (Two Greek verbs meaning "to send" [*pempō* and *apostellō* are used interchangeably see 3:17; 4:34; 5:23-24, 30, 36-37; 6:38.) "send" Jesus is more clearly associated with will for the world, whereas *didōmi* seems to be used in 3:16 to underscore that the incarnation derives from God's love for the world as well as from God's will.

"World" (*kosmos*) in John refers often to those human beings who are at odds with Jesus and God (1:10, 7:7; 15:18-19). The use of the term here suggests that God gives Jesus in love to all people, but only believers accept the gift. Verse 16 also reiterates the theme of eternal life from v. 15, but advances the argument by naming the alternative to eternal life: to perish. This verse makes clear that there is no middle ground in the Johannine vision. God's gift of Jesus, which culminates in Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, decisively alters the options available to the world. If one believes, one's present is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes.

God's gift of Jesus to the world begins the judgment of the world. Verses 17-21 explain this judgment and exemplify what is known as John's "realized eschatology." To speak of realized eschatology means that God's judgment of the world is not a cosmic future event but is underway in the present, initiated by Jesus' coming into the world. God sends the Son into the world in love in order to save the world, not condemn it (v. 17). Yet the very presence of Jesus as incarnate Word in the world confronts the world with a decision, to believe or not to believe, and making that decision is the moment of judgment. If one believes, one is saved; if one does not believe, one condemns oneself unwittingly (v. 18).

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