

## Jesus' Ascension and Christian Worship

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May 15, 2012

In the worship of many modern Christian churches, Jesus' ascension to heaven is a neglected and forgotten reality. However, it has not always been so. As the annual liturgical calendar developed in the fourth century, churches began to devote a special day to commemorate Jesus' ascension within the Easter season prior to Pentecost. Not only the calendar but also the early Christian creeds signified the ascension's prominent place in early Christian thought and life. Both the baptismal creed that later developed into the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed formulated in the first two ecumenical councils at Nicea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.) list Jesus' ascension among the most fundamental articles of the Christian gospel.

This early attention to Jesus' ascension reflects the theology of the Bible, which also attributes great significance to this event. In the Old Testament, humanity's ascension to heaven and participation in the life of heaven with God is prefigured in the sanctuaries of Israel's worship. The Tabernacle and Temple were elaborate sacramental symbols that revealed and made accessible the life of heaven on earth in a visible, tangible manner. These sanctuaries filled with images of angels and the heavenly glory of the Lord (Exod 40:34–48; 1 Kgs 8:6–11) embodied an earthly copy of heavenly realities (Heb 8:5), and the sacrifices were the means by which God drew his people near to enjoy fellowship in a liturgical "ascent" to experience heaven on earth. The so-called burnt offering (Lev 1) especially communicated this heavenly objective and trajectory to worship as the whole animal (symbolizing and representing human worshippers) was completely consumed by the fire of the altar (symbolizing God's presence: Lev 9:24) and transformed into the very symbolic form (smoke/cloud) that continually enveloped God's special presence in the Holy of Holies. The very name of the offering in Hebrew (*'olah*) is "that which ascends," and by these ascension offerings the worshipper "ascended" to enjoy restored communion with God.

Nevertheless, this form of liturgical/sacrificial ascent via animal representatives was a very indirect means of knowing God. It communicated humanity's distance and exclusion from heaven due to sin as much as it embodied the Lord's nearness and the means by which God would overcome sin's effects. The prophet Daniel, however, received a vision of a greater ascension to come. The Lord showed Daniel that "one like a son of man" would ascend to the heavenly presence of God himself to receive authority to rule over all nations in an everlasting kingdom (Dan 7:13–14).

Both the sacrificial worship of Tabernacle and Temple and Daniel's kingdom vision find their fulfillment in Jesus' ascension, and it is a prominent feature of New Testament theology. Jesus promised that he would return to his Father in heaven (John 14:1–12; 17:11; 20:17), and he proclaimed himself to be the Messianic Son of Man of whom Daniel spoke (Mark 14:61–62/Matt 26:63–64/Luke 22:67–70; cf. Matt 19:28). Luke not only documents the fulfillment of Jesus' prediction twice in his own writings (Luke 24:50–51; Acts 1:6–11) but also records Peter's

exposition of its theological meaning (Acts 2:33–36). Luke is not alone, however, in highlighting Jesus’ ascension. Other New Testament writers also frequently mention and/or assume Jesus’ present, ongoing exaltation in glory and ministry from heaven at God’s right hand (Rom 8:34; Phil 2:10–11; Eph 1:20–21; 4:8–10; Col 3:1–4; 2 Thess 1:5–12; Heb 2:5–9; 4:14–16; 8:1–5; 9:23–28; 10:12–21; 12:18–24; 1 Pet 3:21–22; 1 John 2:1–2; Rev 1:12–20; 5:6–14).

These texts teach that Jesus’ ascension is a crucial event in his mission that both reveals his identity as the divine Messiah and accomplishes redemption for his people in multiple ways. By describing his ascension as a return to his pre-incarnate glory in the presence of the Father (John 17:4–5), Jesus shows that the ascension is the Father’s public affirmation and acceptance of his eternal divine Son. Thus, Peter concludes that by raising his Son from the dead and raising him up to heaven as his right hand, God the Father exalts Jesus not only the promised human Messiah but also as the Lord himself (Acts 2:33–36), and Paul connects Jesus’ present exaltation as a glory and authority that is fully divine (Phil 2:9–10, which applies Yahweh’s description in Isaiah 45:23 to Jesus). The ascension shows that Jesus is not merely a privileged human being but rather the Lord of glory who rules all of creation as our Creator and Redeemer.

Jesus’ ascension also constitutes an important advance in his ministry as the incarnate Son of God. First, Jesus’ ascending to heaven is a demonstration of Jesus’ **kingship**. The Father has exalted Jesus to sit as his right hand (Acts 2:33–34; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; 1 Pet 3:22), a metaphor that signifies the place of supreme honor, majesty, and authority over all creation. More specifically, the phrase “right hand of God” alludes to Psalm 110 (see Acts 2:33–34), and thus indicates that Jesus is David’s Lord who serves as both the supreme king and a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus’ ascension is his enthronement as Lord and Christ, the divine-human Messiah (Acts 2:36). This event definitively vindicates Jesus’ claim to be the Son of Man of Daniel’s vision (Dan 7:13–14). It also solves the riddle of God’s promise to grant an eternal kingdom to David’s line (2 Sam 7:12–13), for now the true and ultimate Son of David reigns over a universal, cosmic kingdom that will have no end. Jesus’ ascension means that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15), and the church’s worship and ministry should herald that hopeful proclamation with all the triumphant joy expressed in George Frideric Handel’s great Hallelujah chorus. The God whom we meet in worship and whom we serve in all of our lives is the risen, ascended, exalted, and glorified Lord Jesus Christ who reigns over all, and this ought to produce confident peace, joyful hope, and powerful purpose in all that Christians do as we “set our minds on things that are above” where our life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:1). In the specific context of corporate worship, it implies that public liturgy must maintain elements of grandeur and majesty fitting for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, for the one who calls us and leads us in worship is none other than the resurrected and ascended Lord of glory that John sees in his apocalyptic vision (Rev 1:12–20).

Jesus’ ascension is not only a demonstration of his transcendent majesty but also the means by which we can encounter his immanent presence in our lives. Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of the Father not only as king but also as **high priest**. The whole book of Hebrews centers on this great reality. As the priest in the order of Melchizedek, Jesus fulfills and surpasses all of the functions of the Aaronic priesthood (Heb 7–10). He has gone into the heavenly tabernacle with his own blood as the final and ultimate priest bearing the final and ultimate sacrifice of his

own life. Because the Father receives his death and his life on our behalf, Jesus' ascension signifies that we, too, have access to the Father in heaven (Heb 10:19–25), and from that privileged position, Jesus leads us in every act of worship. He is ultimate liturgist (Heb 8:2), preacher (Heb 2:12a; Rom 10:14), singer (Heb 2:12b), intercessor (Heb 7:25; Rom 8:34), and table host (Heb 13:9b–10; 1 Cor 10:16). As James Torrance has written, our worship is “the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father,” for our worship is mediated and perfected by the incarnate Son of God who continually offers perfect worship to the Father for us and with us.

Jesus' ascension makes this priestly role possible because the consequence of Jesus' ascension is his sending the Holy Spirit to indwell the church and empower his people for the mission of his kingdom. It is because Jesus has gone to the right hand of God that he sends the Comforter as the bearer of his personal presence and power (John 14:1–7; 18–31; Acts 2:33). The Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and thus produces in us faith and love that come to expression in worship and every other form of obedient service and communion with God.

Thus, the ascension is the foundation of the Bible's theology of worship. Jesus' ascension means that he is not only the God and King whom we worship but also the human high priest who leads worship for us and in us through the presence and power of his Spirit. In worship, we experience the union of heaven and earth made tangible and explicit in the concrete actions of worship through which Jesus promises to serve us. The early church acknowledged this heavenly reality of worship in the beginning of the eucharistic prayer with the *Sursum corda* (“Lift up your hearts [to heaven]”) followed by the *Sanctus* (“Holy, holy, holy...”), the song of angels in heaven from Isaiah 6. However, the Bible reveals that the whole liturgy and every act of worship takes place in this heavenly sphere. In both the ministry of Christ's word and table, we receive the Lord's service to us from the throne of God above, and we have the great privilege to join the whole company of heaven in and by the Spirit to serve the Lord in worship.