

The Right Hand of God

T. Hartley Hall

Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia

Though it was over fifteen years ago, I can still remember the scene in 2001, *A Space Odyssey* where the astronaut, after a losing bout with an all too human (and therefore sinful) computer, is cut loose from his tether and drifts off into the cosmic distance. In that inky vacuum of space there were, of course, no clouds to give him protective cover and mercifully “take him out of our sight.” Moreover, you could hardly assume that he was going “up.” Nonetheless, the next time (and almost every time since) I have chanced upon Luke’s ascension account in Acts, chapter 1, this is the picture that keeps coming to my mind. I *know*—theologically, biblically, and in all other ways as well—it’s not the *right* picture at all. And yet that’s still what comes to mind.

Over the past decade and more, a whole generation of American churchgoers have been treated to television and screen presentations of persons floating in weightless space. If even a fair number of these viewers have become locked into the same visual images as I have, then the preacher who attempts to proclaim to them the gospel there in the ascension has a real problem on his or her hands. Assuming, of course, that the preacher is hearty enough to tackle the subject in the first place, and that he or she chooses to do this using the texts from Luke 24:50 or Acts 1:9.

One of the things which this brief treatment will suggest is that when addressing the ascension of Jesus, the Lucan/Acts texts are precisely the place *not* to begin. And this, not because the imagery there won’t resonate with the sensibilities of twentieth-century-american churchgoers. Rather it’s because these more familiar accounts simply do not express the theology which has always informed this particular affirmation of Christian faith as well as other, and therefore more suitable, texts do.

At the outset, it’s worth noting that except for the single verse—Mark 14:62—in the secondary, longer ending of Mark, the Luke/Acts verses are the only descriptive references to the ascension anywhere in the Gospels. There are allusions to its elsewhere, notably in John, chapter 20, but nothing descriptive of the “event.” In contrast to the Gospel paucity, there are a wealth of references in the epistles, representing a wide range of Christian authorship. The following brief quotations are indicative:

Romans 8:34: “It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us.”

Ephesians 1:20: “. . . which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places.”

Colossians 3:1 “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

Hebrews 12:2: “(Jesus) . . . endured the cross . . . and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (See also Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12)

1 Peter 3:21: “. . . through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God.”

Along with these, we ought also to include Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts, chapter 2, where he twice refers to Jesus' ascension, in each instance basing it on a proof-text from the Psalms (16:8-11 and 110:1). This speech to the gathered crowds ends with Peter saying: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him *both Lord and Christ*, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Emphasis mine).

In light of these passages, it becomes apparent that the early church both embodied and articulated a theological conviction that the resurrected/exalted Jesus continues to live—and to function on their behalf—in and from the presence of God himself. The common descriptive phrase which expressed this configuration of “ascension faith” is one to the effect that Jesus is “seated at the right hand of God.” And it is precisely in this form that this early affirmation is introduced and preserved for us in the Apostles' Creed. (And also, it might be noted, crept into that other Gospel reference in the longer ending of Mark.)

Where did the early Christians get this notion, and its descriptive imagery? For “ascension” (like “resurrection”) did not itself originate with the Christian community. It was, in fact, a rather widespread motif in the ancient world. At least two “ascensions” could be found in what were to become canonical literature—those of Enoch and Elijah. Increasingly, ascensions were incorporated into later Jewish writings which, though subsequently determined to be noncanonical, circulated with considerable authority and influence during the lifetime of Jesus and his disciples. In these, there were ascensions for such Biblical notables as Adam, Abraham, Moses, Levi, Isaiah, Baruch, Ezra—even one for Raphael (Tobit 12:16-20).

This simply says that the mythological motif of “ascension” was firmly in place when the Christian community came upon the scene. And when this community adopted (apparently at Jesus' own leading) a “Son of Man” Christology—that is, when Christians began to explain who Jesus was in terms of categories associated with this Enochian figure who was expected to come *from heaven*—the theological necessity of an “ascension” for Jesus became apparent. Jesus' final confession of his own identity before the high priest (Mark 14:62, and parallels: Matthew 26:64, Luke 22:69) is couched in this particular Christology—and, significantly, includes the familiar descriptive reference to his place at the right hand of God.

The believing community supported its convictions about the locus of the risen Jesus with ready references to Psalm 110:1, which is employed for this purpose in all three of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 21:41-44, Mark 22:35-37, Luke 20:41-44), in Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:34-36), and in Hebrews 1:13.

But, the epistles' formulations aside, what of a Sunday morning does the preacher do with Luke—and his Olivet/Bethany accounts of the resurrected Jesus being lifted bodily upwards through the air and into the clouds just above his onlooking and wistful disciples? Well, the first thing the preacher should do (as has been suggested earlier) is *not* to start with Luke. In Luke's story, the congregation can too easily be trapped into a visual literalism, and

the focus—the issue at stake—becomes the rational or scientific possibility of some form of bodily levitation. Or worse, the issue begins to revolve around what form the “resurrection body” of Jesus might have assumed on whatever particular occasion.

It’s much better to begin with the earlier descriptive expression of this affirmation as found in the epistles, where Jesus is shown to us seated at the right hand of God. And the preacher may begin here knowing that both forms of imagery are attempting to say much the same thing—for the “cloud” in Luke is nothing other than the *shekinah/doxa* of God. The “cloud” is the same divine presence that led Israel through the wilderness, that overshadowed the Mount of Transfiguration, and now envelops a risen Jesus. “Ascending into the cloud,” in other words, is the rough *theological* equivalent of being “seated at the right hand of God.”

All the canonical Gospels clearly affirm Jesus’ resurrection without ever attempting to describe the event itself. The epistles all do the same as regards Jesus’ ascension. They affirm its reality without attempting to describe when, where, or how it took place. In the light of subsequent Christian history (and subsequent Christian preaching on the subject!) Luke would have been well advised to follow their good examples.

Moreover, in much the same way that the epistles’ resurrection “appearance” accounts are primary to the Gospels’ more secondary “empty tomb” stories, so also here. The epistles (and let’s include among these that early source which gives us Peter’s Pentecost sermon) provide the primary sources for ascension faith.

The great advantage of epistle ascension imagery for the twentieth-century churchgoer is that it is so *clearly* a symbolic device designed to communicate something *else*. Anyone even vaguely sensitive to the catechetical truth that “God is a spirit and hath not a body like a man” knows rather instinctively that thrones and seating arrangements in relation to an apparently corporeal deity are not to be focused upon as in themselves embodying truth in any form—but that we are called to look beyond them to a truth which they represent and towards which they can only point us.

Luke, who did not write for twentieth-century churchgoers, employs imagery that does not serve us so well. In our world, replete with space-walking—or drifting—astronauts, there is too *much* (not too little) potential for identification of his “ascension” with the historically possible, and the theological-mythical aspects of the reality are too easily ignored, missed, and lost.

Having taken the time to establish the secondary character of Luke’s ascension narrative—secondary both as a source *and* in usefulness as homiletical material—we’d still do well to know and understand what Luke was about when we wrote it, and to affirm his intentions and efforts in this regard.

Luke is part and parcel of a very long biblical tradition in which a people or, where appropriate, individual writers found themselves engaged either in 1) theologizing history or in 2) historicizing theology/mythology for the purpose of bringing particular human beings into a relation with divine truth.

The Eden/creation story is a prime early example of this latter movement. The biblical account shifts creation and human origins out of the realm of

timelessness and infinity (where it is to be found in pagan creation myths) and relocates it in a specific, identifiable geographic region *on earth*, and places it into a time-frame that is humanly comprehensible and determinable as having taken place *in history, as history* (so Archbishop Usher obligingly informs us) in 4004 B.C.

The Exodus observation (14:21) that “the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind.” is an early example of the former process. Here, a historical event—the strong wind blowing all night—is given a theological interpretation and significance: It was *the Lord* who did this for his people.

The Johannine Gospel writer is doing essentially the same thing, though in a more involved manner, when he deliberately shifts the time of Jesus’ last supper with his disciples so that, instead of its being a Passover meal as in all the synoptics, it becomes instead the meal of preparation on the evening before. Why? From the beginning of his Gospel account, Jesus has been identified as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). This is a Johannine theological affirmation concerning the identity and the significance of Jesus. It is very important for John’s theology, therefore, that Jesus (since he is affirmed as Lamb of God) be crucified at the same time—the same moment, in fact—that the Paschal lamb is also being slain. In order to make this “happen,” John is obliged to shift all his crucifixion chronology.

To say that Jesus died on a cross is merely a descriptive statement about a historical event. To say that Jesus is the Lamb God whose death is expiation for the sins of all humankind is a theological affirmation of myth proportions. In this instance, “history” clearly serves John’s theological interests; and he apparently feels quite free to “bend” history in this service. But then, we’ve always known that John was a theologian down to the marrow of his bones. Luke, however, is different—or at least he’s supposed to be! For he’s always been touted to us preachers as the *historian* par excellence.

Maybe so. But Luke’s reputation in this one regard shouldn’t lead any preacher astray. The fact is that Luke is as much a theologian as any of the others in that apostolic band, and he demonstrates this in his treatment of Jesus’ ascension, in much the same way that John has done with his crucifixion-last supper chronology shift.

Luke’s ascension scene, with Jesus rising into the cloud, represents his own literary effort to give a very profound theological conviction some sort of historical expression and form. It is, in effect, one more in the long series of instances where a biblical writer has taken a theological/mythological category and attempted to express its truth in terms of what had happened or was happening—that is, in terms of time, location, and persons—and thereby give timeless truth a historical shape. And I, for one, am convinced that Luke’s ascension account should be affirmed, and valued, for what it is.

St. Augustine wrote words to the effect that the Christian experience is one of “faith seeking understanding.” Under this rubric Luke may appropriately join hands with all those writers of epistles who seated Jesus at the right hand of God and were unconcerned with how he got there.

One last matter remains to be addressed. How did these writers—all of them—intend (to use Augustine’s phrase) that an ascension faith should be

understood? Their choice of imagery, of course, gives us the clues.

The ascension is the Christian symbol (i.e., doctrine, dogma) of the Lordship of Christ, and may be understood as the supreme expression of the deity of Jesus of Nazareth. While the resurrection, ascension, and present status of Christ at God's "right hand" are all results of a single act of God in vindicating the crucified Jesus, still the truth of the resurrection is not the same truth as that of his ascension. It is one thing to assert that Jesus has been raised from death. It is quite another (however closely connected) to assert that he *now* shares in the sovereignty of God over heaven and earth. This distinction was recognized quite early, and is encapsulated in the conclusion to Peter's Pentecost sermon (noted earlier) where as a consequence of Jesus' ascension it is affirmed that "God has made him both *Lord* and *Christ*, this Jesus whom you crucified." Liturgists have noted that while Christmas is the festival of the humanity of God, Easter is the festival of the deity of Jesus. In liturgical as well as theological terms, the Easter festival reaches its climax in the ascension.

In preaching on the ascension, it is wise for the exegete to keep in mind that the ascension is, first and foremost, an affirmation of faith. It need not be thought of as a "historical event"—unless it should be simply the last post-resurrection appearance to the disciples. In any case, historical events do not in themselves either cause faith or guarantee it, and they should not be employed homiletically as "proofs" of theological affirmations.

Historically, the ascension marks a turning point in the faith of the very early believing community. It provides a necessary link between Easter and Pentecost. Because of the ascension, when the Holy Spirit comes, he will be recognized and received by disciples not only as the Spirit of God but also as the Spirit of Jesus Christ. In the future, all experiences of the Spirit of God will be known within parameters set by the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified Christ.

Moreover, the ascension becomes the necessary prelude for the Church's mission. It sets the stage for a shift in direction: from the Spirit of God present in Jesus to the Spirit of Christ in and with Jesus' disciples. The shift is already discernible in the query of Luke's divine spokesmen on Mt. Olivet. After the ascension, disciples do *not* "stand looking into heaven," but rather turn their attention to the world of which Jesus is Lord.

Nor should the preacher ever overlook the political overtones inherent to this faith affirmation. To embrace an ascension faith that Jesus is Lord is also to deny that Caesar is Lord—or that King George III, or Hitler, or the presidency, or Congress, or any other earthly princeling or power is Lord. No Christian was ever thrown to the lions for claiming Jesus as Savior. In fact, a strictly-held "Easter faith" need not disturb any status quo. An ascension faith, however, can and should be disruptive of all lesser claims and allegiances than that of Jesus Christ.

By all counts, the ascension is not only a radical but also a remarkable Christian affirmation—but not because it requires twentieth-century churchgoers to believe certain things about bodies floating upwards into the clouds. It's remarkable because, in spite of all the obvious evidence to the contrary, it declares our allegiance to the One who really *rules* this world.