

Ascension.

It is funny the things people get confused by. The end of Mark's Gospel is a bit of a mess. It is pretty clear that early on, the last page went astray, and there are literally no copies extant of that original last page. Some copyists, making copies for distribution simply stopped when the words ran out, at the end of verse 8, which makes no sense as the Gospel ends with the fleeing and frightened women... . Others had a go at making a new ending though their writing style was obviously different from Mark's and two versions of that were made, a shorter one and a longer one. Result, a ghastly mess! Some old copies of Mark's Gospel in Greek just stop, a few have just the short new ending, some have the long new ending and some with marvellous predictability have both. To add lustre to the mess, someone clearly had a go at writing a bit more of verse 14 and so there are various bits of that floating about as well. In the new longer passage, Jesus ascension into heaven is briefly described in Mark 16:19, although no location is given for it.

In the Gospels where the ending is not such a mess, some of the events described after Jesus' resurrection are in different locations. Not surprisingly, people start to try and use this as a reason for doubting. Indeed this itself is a very long established tradition (Matthew 28:17 and John 20:24-29) and it is rather reassuring that doubts or no doubts, God used these people to get the Christian Church started.

Much of the narrative is based in Jerusalem (John 20:19-29, Luke 24:36-49, Acts 1:1-5) or nearby in Emmaus (unnamed in Mark 16:12-13, but fully described in Luke 24:13-35) or Bethany, where the ascension is described as occurring, in fact it is the only location given for the ascension, (Luke 24:50-51, Acts 1:6-11). Other parts of the narrative are clearly set in Galilee (John 21 and Matthew 28:16-20) but nowhere in these passages is the ascension mentioned, although a surprising number of Christians are certain that Matthew 28 describes the ascension, it really doesn't!

So, what you have is a messy ending to Mark, some action set in Jerusalem, some in Galilee and some back in Jerusalem. None of the Gospels actually go ahead and describe the journey to and from Galilee during the 40 days which Acts 1:3 mentions as occurring between resurrection and ascension, although John's Gospel has some action set in Jerusalem and some in Galilee.

There is another source of pondering on the sequence and significance of events of events during the period after resurrection up to and including ascension and that is the new testament books after the Gospels. In a sense, we have already begun looking at those because the reading selected to describe the ascension is Acts 1:6-11. There are several more key passages in Acts itself especially in Peter's words, Stephen's and in Luke's writing about Paul, several key passages in the writings of Paul, some really central passages by the author of the book to the Hebrews and some shorter but immensely important words in Peter's writing and that of John.

In Mark 16:19 and twice in Luke's writing specifically about the ascension in Luke 24:50-51, Acts 1:6-11, Jesus is lifted up, from the disciples to whom he had been talking, into heaven. In the ascension accounts, only in the longer ending of Mark does Jesus 'sit at the right hand of God'. However, although not in the ascension passages, such as they are, in the other Gospels, Jesus words earlier in his ministry explain why we are so sure that is where Jesus, the ascended Jesus, now is.

In Matthew, Jesus twice addresses this issue, in Matthew 22:41-46, Jesus challenges the Pharisees (my paraphrases), starting in verse 42, 'whose son is the messiah?' to which he gets the predictable reply 'The son of David'. Jesus then asks how David, speaking in the Spirit, calls the son 'Lord' in 43, going on to quote David's words from Psalm 110:1 "The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand

until I put your enemies under your feet.” In verse 45 challenging ‘If David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?’

After his arrest, questioned in the Sanhedrin in Matthew chapter 26:63, the high priest Caiaphas asks ‘under oath by the living God, are you the Messiah, Son of God?’. Jesus’ answer references both Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14 “you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One (Psalm 110:1) coming on the clouds of heaven.’ Which in Daniel 7:13-14 continues ‘the son of man approached and was led into the presence of the Ancient of Days and was given authority, glory and sovereign power; worshipped by all nations; an everlasting dominions and kingdom which will never be destroyed.’ Jesus didn’t have to continue past ‘coming on the clouds of heaven’; everyone present knew what comes next in Daniel.

Mark 12:35-37 and Luke 20:41-44 both reference Psalm 110:1 and David’s words. And Luke 22:67-70 and similarly in Mark 14:61-62, in which, for example, the high priest asks Jesus ‘are you the Messiah (or the Christ), Son of the Blessed One?’ to which Jesus replies in verse 62, ‘I am!’ There is no ambiguity, and ‘I am’ everyone listening will have known was the name that God told Moses to tell the Israelites in Exodus 3:14 “I am who I am, I am has sent me to you.’ Jesus did not stop there, he went on ‘you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power (or the Mighty One, the Almighty) and coming with (on, amid) the clouds of heaven.’

So the ascension and Jesus rising out of the sight of the disciples was absolutely central to the sequence of events from Palm Sunday and the entry of the Jewish King into Jerusalem, through Holy week to cries of crucify, crucify, to Jesus death of the cross, burial, resurrection and 40 days later, ascension on clouds of heaven, to take his place at the right hand of the Father.

I have shown the women also on the hill at Bethany, because they were present at all the other key points, at the foot of the cross and first to know that Jesus was resurrected, so I am confident that they too will have seen the ascension and will have understood the significance of Jesus rising into the clouds, the clouds of heaven to take up his place at the right hand of the Almighty.

So, having said I was going to look at the epistles, I have set a foundation for that consideration by looking first at the Gospels and the significance of the events of the ascension. After the ascension came the Holy Spirit, first to the Jewish Christians at Pentecost in Acts 2, and then to Gentile Christians, at the start of the worldwide Church for all people, in Acts 10:34-48. However, between those two events, there is a very important witness to the risen ascended status of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that was Stephen.

Stephen’s story in Acts 6 and 7 is a harrowing one, in which he presents an eloquent explanation for the status of Jesus as Messiah in the context of the prophecies of the Old Testament, finishing by accusing the high priest and his cronies in Acts 7:51-53 of being stiff necked, opposing the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets and failing to keep the Law. His next statement confirms everything that Jesus had said and that had been prophesied in Psalm 110 and Daniel 7. In Acts 7:55-56 Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked into heaven to see Jesus at the right hand of glorious God and says “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man at the Right Hand of God!” (my paraphrase). As he is stoned we are introduced to Saul, the persecutor, who would become Paul, the eye witness of the risen, ascended Lord Jesus and his apostle..

Paul’s Damascus Road meeting with Jesus was so important in establishing his right to be seen as a true witness to the resurrection and therefore a true apostle, that in Acts, Luke retells the events three times, in Acts 9:1–19; 22:6–16; and 26:12–23. For me personally, the truth of Paul’s testimony is central to the story of my becoming a Christian. Because when I was asked what my biggest

objection to the ideas of Jesus being resurrected, my reply was 'too few witnesses, not enough people saw him.' And the late Rev John Bronnert held out to me a Bible open at 1 Corinthians 15 and I read, in the middle of a list of appearances, 'Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died'.

I have heard people who claim to be Christians suggest that Paul made this up, to 'big-up' the story of the resurrection. If Paul lied about this then everything in his epistles must be thrown out of the Bible. You can't have it both ways. Either Paul was a reliable witness and the 500 did see Jesus. Or the entire Gospel is called into question. Actually it would be more than 500 because in Greek, he specifies brothers, men.

So why isn't it mentioned in the Gospels? And when did it occur. It seems most unlikely that 500 people could gather in Jerusalem, a Jerusalem in which the disciples hid in locked rooms. However at some point in the 40 days, Jesus clearly went north, to Galilee, to cook fish and bread on the shore while some of the disciples struggled with a miraculous netful of fish (John 21). And he went up onto a mountain to deliver the great commission in Matthew 28:16-20. There the 11 disciples unambiguously worshipped him, even Thomas, who had by this time put his hands on Jesus wounds and stated, without a shadow of doubt, 'My Lord and My God.' (John 20:24-29, just a week after Mary Magdalene had told the disciples 'I have seen the Lord'. ).

But Matthew says 'some doubted'. Some who? Some of the 11? I don't think that is even remotely credible. And that means there were more people there. It was Galilee where 5000 were miraculously fed. So why not a large crowd. You can't prove it of course, but it seems by far the most plausible location for the 500 to have seen Jesus. The 500, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church.

And from Galilee, back to Jerusalem and to Bethany and the ascension. An ascension which, when I first became a Christian, I largely ignored, resurrection seeming to me to be the key thing. And so it is of course, but as important I now see, are ascension and Jesus arrival with clouds of heaven to take his place at the right hand of God as prophesied so clearly and as evidenced in Acts, but also in the epistles, to which, finally, we shall now turn.

I want to start with a book often passed by as 'difficult', the Epistle to the Hebrews. Right from the start this book concentrates on God and on Jesus. The very first verse immediately shows something of the nature of the author of this book. Two of the first three words are found only here in the Greek Bible and they are both unusual albeit related, words, πολυμερῶς, meaning, *in many portions*; used by Josephus and later educated Greek authors including Vettius Valens and πολυτρόπως, meaning, *in many ways*; an older Greek word used by Homer and also by Philo. They typify the Greek used in the epistle to the Hebrews, which is generally better written than anything else in the New Testament, strongly suggesting that the author was not, as has sometimes been assumed, Paul, but likely someone who wrote only this letter. I could suggest some possibilities but the truth is that we shall probably never know.

The first two verses recapitulate the prophesied nature of the Messiah in the Old Testament and that the Son had spoken directly (as he did in all the Gospels), who God appointed heir of everything (especially ref. Matthew 28:18) and through whom everything was created (as particularly in John's Gospel). Verse 3 begins with Jesus as God and refers to Jesus role in sustaining all things by his powerful word, like Paul's Colossians 1:15-17. The second half of this verse in Hebrews says that once Jesus has made purification for sins (which would refer to his death) then says 'he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.' In order to do this, Jesus has to have ascended into heaven. And

in order to do that, having been dead, he has to undergo resurrection, the implications of which are explored in Hebrews chapter 7:16-28.

And then at the start of Chapter 8, the writer reminds us of the central focus of the book is the heavenly ascension of Jesus, that he is seated at the right hand of the Almighty and that we have a high priest not because of some human jiggery pokery, but because God himself set Jesus as our high priest. Christ serves because he has been given, on oath, indestructible resurrection life (7:16-17). So he has been appointed through his perfect obedience (5:9-10, 7:28). He is not like human priests who have to do stuff over and over again, because Christ enters heaven, through ascension, perfect, he has put away sin and can sit on our behalf (9:23-27).

And so we come back to ascension, because Christ has to ascend with his resurrected body to pave the way for us as forerunner. Jesus is glorified in his ascended, resurrected body and that in turn allows us to be glorified. To bring his children, his learners, his disciples, those who believe, he has to ascend up into heaven as the new creation, as king and permanent priest.

He established his rights as King, as a Jew, a Jewish King, through Jewish procedures from Palm Sunday through Holy Week, and he established his rights as perfect priest and king forever through his death, his burial, his resurrection from the sealed tomb, his life eternal in that human body, as Thomas so graphically proved and believed, and as the disciples saw him prepare food for them and eat it with them. So, thus prepared, perfect he could enter heaven and sit at the right hand of the Father after his ascension into heaven with clouds of heaven.

Of course Paul did understand all of this and so in some of his most inspiring, inspired passages, he takes us on a journey which requires ascension as a key step in the sequence of events that make Jesus not just Thomas's Lord and God, but my Lord and my God too. I don't mind admitting to having favourite bits of the bible. I'm human, what else would you expect? So, having dealt with Hebrews which is glorious and wonderful and tough going, it is a glorious release to turn to Romans Chapter 8. There's so much to choose from, it's difficult to know where to start. You feel a bit like a kid with a box of chocolates; should we start with the best ones or the worst ones, it doesn't much matter because they are all so jolly good!

To begin at the beginning, the first 17 verses of Romans 8 build up to a glorious climax to a place where those led by the Spirit are children of God, Not slaves to fear, but adopted through the Spirit, witnessing inside of us that we are children, heirs, joint heirs with Christ. Paul knew about suffering as so many of us do, but like so many of us he knew that it was only for a time and that through hope in the unseen (with blessings to dear Thomas for making the point for Jesus) we are given the strength and patience to persevere.

Even better, in one of my favourite verses in the entire bible, when I don't know what to pray for, or even when I'm not awake or aware enough to decide, The Spirit groans wordless intercessions on my behalf. He knows all the stuff I fret about, and there's a mountain of it, and He intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And the Spirit is God and so God knows everything I want to pray about and that there are not enough hours the day to pray for it all, but God knows!

All my worries for the future, for the three billion poorest and most vulnerable people, for sea-level rise, for the millions migrating by walking barefoot across continents in the hope of something better than the rubbish where they left, something better than one toilet between 1000 people, something better than being borne into a caste whose aspiration is to earn a rupee a day for cleaning up other people's human waste (Dalit manual scavengers), for the most catastrophic crash in biodiversity in

the history of this beautiful blue pearl set in a sea of stars, and the terrible things which are being done to indigenous peoples, have been done already, all that stuff, God knows.

And looking back over a lifetime of things I should not have done, things I should not have said, things I should not have thought, some of them a life sentence that I gave myself because every single day they bubble up in my mind at some point or points. And then I read on in Romans 8 and I come to the passage, if God is for us who is against us? God did not withhold his own Son, but gave him. And in giving him, it is God who justifies, and none to condemn, 'Jesus Christ who was raised,' it says in Romans 8:34, 'who is at the right hand of God', (and, I add, who in order to have gone from being raised to being at the right hand must have undergone ascension), intercedes for us.

Not because we deserve it, but because God is love (1 John 4:8 and 4:16). And God loved us first, and so we love. And going back to Romans 8, it is hard not to be inspired by 8:35 'Who will separate us from Christ's love? hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword?' and 8:37-39, all earned because death and burial was followed by resurrection was followed by ascension and by Jesus sitting at the right hand of God 'we are more than conquerors through the love of God,' Paul goes on with one of his greatest lists, 'nothing, not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.'

And in Ephesians 1:20 and Colossians 3:1, Paul backs up the message about Jesus sat at the right hand of God, and therefore Jesus, ascended one. And Peter, who right back at the start of Acts, and don't worry I don't intend to go back to the beginning, in 1 Peter 3:21-22 reemphasises the point, from baptism, 'through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him,' in the middle of which, is required today's subject, ascension.

Love, Grace and Peace from Rick