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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

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The Origins of 'Ascension' Terminology

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The 'Ascension' is rightly described by Barclay¹ as the most difficult incident in the life of Jesus either to visualise or to understand. Attempts to portray it in films or paintings only result in it appearing absurd yet its importance is underlined by its assertion in the Creeds.

We no longer conceive of a three-tier universe with hell beneath and heaven above: heaven is no more in space-time than God is. Thus to speak of Christ ascending into heaven is to use mythological terms², to employ symbolic language, like talking of a schoolboy being promoted to a 'higher' class³. It is possible to conceive the *fact* of ascension although it is not possible to imagine the *manner* of it⁴. It represents a movement from the physical to the spiritual and such a movement would not be perceptible.⁵

We are therefore faced with a dilemma when reading the biblical accounts of the ascension of Jesus: what was it meant to convey about Jesus and why was it described in that particular terminology?

First of all, was the ascension of Jesus a completely novel phenomenon or were there other events like this which would explain the origin of ascension terminology? Both revelation (movement from heaven to earth) and ascension (movement from earth to heaven) have a place in every religious system that has a geocentric view of the world.⁶ For example, in ancient Egyptian religion, the Pyramid texts recount how 'they made a ladder for N that he might ascend to heaven on it'⁷.

all joyfully declared Romulus, the king and father of
the city of Rome, to be a god, the son of god.

(Livy, Book 1:16).⁸

Hercules was said to have been carried up to heaven in a chariot and four horses from his funeral pyre. Neither his bones nor his ashes could be found. This is thought to emphasize the idea that the earth was not a worthy resting place for one so godlike.⁹

Ascension is often a reward for very righteous men who are 'taken' by the god and thereby avoid having to go through death: for example, in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*¹⁰, Utnapishtim (the equivalent of Noah) is 'taken' by the god Enlil because he had pleased him by his previous conduct and so deserved to escape the common lot of man. The corresponding Babylonian myth describes the fate of Xisuthros,

the hero of the deluge. In recognition of his piety he was not subjected to death but was assumed to heaven.¹¹ Similarly in the Old Testament, Enoch in recognition of his righteousness, 'walked with God and he was not for God took him' (Gen 5:24).

In this Book of Enoch we learn that the purpose of his ascension to heaven was not just to escape death but to be instructed in heavenly things¹². According to Segal¹³ the Enoch traditions are much older than previously thought. The Aramaic books found at Qumran suggest that Enoch stories may be as old as the Book of Daniel which means they may well have been an influence on descriptions of the ascension of Jesus.

The Enoch account is thought to be based on the story of Enmeduranki, recounted on a ritual tablet discovered in the library of Assurbanipal. Enmeduranki, the legendary king of Sippar, was summoned by the god and initiated into the secrets of heaven and earth. Segal¹⁴ points out the similarities between this Mesopotamian myth and the ascension of Jesus: the Mesopotamian king is commissioned from heaven itself; he enters the heavenly palace; he is received by the god; he is named with the glorious names; he has the sovereignty of the world handed over to him.

The idea of ascent to heaven in order to gain access to the divine presence and receive knowledge of divine secrets¹⁴ was 'a stock piece of Jewish and Jewish Christian apocalyptic symbolism'¹⁵ but was usually understood to include separation of body and soul¹⁶. For example, in *The Ascension of Isaiah* 7:1f.¹⁷ Isaiah describes how he is led away by an angel through the heavens and has temporarily left behind his own body. Such belief presumably originated in mystical experience like the soul's ascent in ecstasy described by Paul in II Cor. 12:2¹⁸. It also occurs in beliefs about the afterlife. Mystical experience of separation from the body was thought to be a foretaste of what lay in store after death.

A.F. Segal¹⁹ notes that:

in view of the polemic against claims to first hand knowledge of God, together with the biblical statement that no man can see God and live (Ex. 33:20), it is rather surprising that so many ascensions and ecstatic journeys are reported in the intertestamental literature.

His conclusion is that the influence of foreign traditions was obviously a major factor contributing to the popularity of the ascension structure. Rowland's explanation for the popularity of ascension structure in intertestamental writings is that by the third and second centuries B.C. God has become transcendent:

He is enthroned in heaven and his activities are carried out among men by angelic intermediaries or others like the Spirit or Shekinah. The cosmological beliefs were such that it became necessary for anyone

who would enter the immediate presence of God to embark on a journey through the heavenly world in order to reach God himself.
(The Open Heaven, page 80).

An example is this: 'clouds invited me and a mist summoned me'.

1 Enoch 14:8 (200–160 B.C.)

However, there is no exact parallel to the ascension of Jesus: Enoch and Elijah were assumed into heaven without having to undergo death as were Enmeduranki, Utnapishtim and Xisuthros; the ascent of Romulus and Hercules occurred without resurrection. The assumption of Moses²⁰ was conceived of as being consistent with continuance of his corpse in the grave but the ascension of Jesus presupposed an empty tomb.²¹ However, it must by now be obvious that ascension or assumption into heaven was a well-known theme and many strands of these various accounts are reminiscent of the ascension of Jesus. This does not automatically mean that all accounts of ascensions influenced Christianity,²² sometimes it was the ascension of Christ which influenced other accounts. Nevertheless, many of these ascension traditions were known in the time of Jesus and would certainly shape the thought patterns of his contemporaries.²³

Christian theologians, arguing for the uniqueness of the ascension, point out that there was nothing in Jewish beliefs about the Messiah which would suggest death followed by revivification and exaltation²⁴. However Jesus was viewed not only in messianic terms, and in Judaism the theme of the just man taken up after death into the highest heaven for glorification was common.²⁵

Another argument advanced to support the view of ascension as unique was to ask how could the disciples, nurtured as they were in the extreme monotheism of Judaism, conceive of God and Jesus both in heaven unless some event occurred to convince them of it? A.F. Segal²⁶ tells of the tradition of 'two powers in heaven' which can be found in Talmudic and Midrashic literature of the first to the sixth centuries A.D. (although it is thought to have originated much earlier than this). Philo interprets all references to angels as referring to the mediating *logos* figure which he even calls a son of God. The patriarchs are allegorized as *ascending* through various levels of discipline, thought and contemplation to be called into the divine presence. Philo actually calls *logos* 'the second God' and Segal concludes from this that the 'two powers' tradition was present in Judaism in his time²⁷. This could have been an influence on Christian ideas about the ascension of Jesus. Segal²⁸ points out that Christians did rely on many of the traditions about a principal angel for their exaltation theology although Jesus is never called an angel in the New Testament.²⁹

The terminology of the ascension has another source: the Testimonia later seen to play a part in the theology of the church.³⁰ The relevant testimonia came originally from the Psalms and express the establishment of the messiah in his royal state. Most scholars³¹ consider that Psalm 110 is one of the so-called Royal Psalms.³² 'The Lord said to my Lord, You shall sit at my right hand when I make your enemies the footstool under your feet.' (Psalm 110:1).

This verse may lie behind every New Testament statement of exaltation³³ for example: Acts 2:30f.; 1 Cor. 15:25f.; Eph. 1:19f. and Hebrews. Evans³⁴ suggests that it is synonymous with resurrection if rendered as exalted *by* the right hand of God but it carries the thought forward if the meaning is exalted *at* the right hand of God. Loader³⁵ concludes that Ps. 110 was used at a very early stage in the development of christological thought to interpret the meaning of the resurrection as exaltation by God of Jesus.

Psalms 24; 47; 68; 110 are all used by Christian writers in connexion with the ascension. These are thought to be enthronement psalms used at a New Year celebration.³⁶ Was there a New Year festival in Old Testament Israel as in other ancient near eastern cultures? For example, in the Sumerian-Accadian New Year festival, the god is dramatically impersonated by the king who undergoes a symbolic 'death' by humiliation or suffering then is reinstated for another year.³⁷ The relationship between god and king is often likened to that between father and son in the North West Semitic area. Not only is the king the *son* of the god, he is identified with the god:³⁸ 'You are my son' he said: this day I become your father.' (Psalm 2:7).

Similarly, at the Babylonian New Year festival, the chief priest subjected the king to a ritual humiliation before Marduk. Possibly there was a festival like this at Jerusalem.³⁹ Schweizer believes that this theme of humiliation and exaltation (which is part of the ascension terminology) determined the early Church's understanding of Jesus.⁴⁰ Some critics conclude from this that the story of ascension is a later legend which arose as a result of theological reflection on the fact of the resurrection⁴¹. I find the most plausible view to be that ascension was purely a spiritual occurrence: the disciples had some sort of experience which assured them of Jesus' triumph over death. Jesus' survival was conceived as involving his body just as today if we try to envisage a loved-one surviving death, we think of them in bodily terms without necessarily subscribing to a theory of physical resurrection.

As time passed, it became necessary to assert bodily resurrection for apologetic reasons. In arguments against Jews and Docetists, appearances of the risen Jesus were described in more material terms (he eats and drinks). This physical resurrection theory left them with a body to dispose of, therefore the exaltation idea which was originally tied in with resurrection, now became a separate event of

ascension to emphasize the belief that Jesus is now, in some sense, 'with God'. This ascension idea was then further developed theologically:

When earliest Christology identified Jesus with the Son of Man, expected shortly from heaven, the theological necessity of ascension was apparent. The Son of Man's functions of dominion, glory, kingdom and subservience of all (Dan.:14) pointed the direction in which the ascension's significance and terminology grew. Ascension becomes the key to all the spiritual gifts and tends to replace parousia as the beginning of Christ's kingdom, and also becomes a central doctrine of anti-gnostic polemic from Colossians on.

(Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Ascension).

This seems to me to be the only possible explanation of all the anomalies which present themselves when we compare different accounts of the ascension. As Barclay points out, 'if the ascension had not appeared in stories of the life of Jesus, a dramatist would have invented it. It is a dramatic necessity, the only fitting end to the earthly life of Jesus.'⁴²

Benoit¹⁰² describes the position outlined above but dismisses it on the grounds that Jewish expectation was of resurrection of the body. However a perusal of the intertestamental literature shows that Jewish beliefs about life after death in the time of Jesus were heterogeneous. It is certainly not true to say that all Jews conceived of the afterlife as bodily resurrection.⁴³

Bauer⁴⁴ argues that no Jew would have understood non-bodily ascension but as previously mentioned⁴⁵ such spiritual journeys did occur in the intertestamental literature. This was probably due to the influence of Hellenistic thought and perhaps to mystical experience (for example, the Ascension of Isaiah) therefore some Jews could and did conceive of non-bodily ascension.

All this demonstrates that the conception of Jesus ascending into heaven was not the unique revolution in thinking that many theologians suggest. Although there is no exact parallel, the idea of ascension was not a completely novel phenomenon and we can find a previous origin for most of the terminology used to describe it. In describing the ascension, the first Christians were using contemporary images to convey to others their post-death experience of Jesus.

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NOTES

- 1 W. Barclay, *The Plain Man looks at the Apostle's Creed*, Fontana, 1967, p. 162.
- 2 M. Perry, *The Easter Enigma*, London, 1959, p. 41.
- 3 B.M. Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies*, Leiden, 1968, p. 85.

- 4 *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*: article on 'Ascension', p. 156.
- 5 *Loc. cit.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 7 A.F. Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their environment', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Vol II, 23.2 1980, p. 1350.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 1348.
- 9 *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*: 'Ascension', p. 152.
- 10 *Epic of Gilgamesh*, translated by Sanders, Penguin 1960, p. 113.
- 11 *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*: 'Ascension', p. 152.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 A.F. Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 1359.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 J. Danielou, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine*, Vol I: The Theology of Jewish Christianity, London 1964, p. 253.
- 16 C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, S.P.C.K. 1982, p. 80.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 386: Rowland dates this to the late first-century early second century AD.
- 18 *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*: 'Ascension', p. 151.
- 19 A.F. Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 1354.
- 20 Josephus, *Antiquities* IV 8:48.
- 21 *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*: 'Ascension', p. 153.
- 22 B.M. Metzger, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
- 23 Similarly in near death experiences, Christians often encounter a figure that they identify with Jesus whereas Buddhists see Amida Buddha and non-believers may only experience a bright light. This serves as an illustration of the fact that the perception of certain experiences is influenced by the culture one lives in.
- 24 *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 'Ascension', p. 153.
- 25 J. Danielou, *op. cit.*, p. 254.
- 26 A.F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, Leiden 1977.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 29 A.F. Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent', *op. cit.*, p. 1371.
- 30 J. Danielou, *op. cit.*, p. 255.
- 31 Gunkel, *The Psalms: a form critical introduction*, Fortress Press, 1967. See also F. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition*, Cambridge 1976, p. 27.
- 32 See D.M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, S.B.L. Monograph Series 18 Nashville, New York 1973.
- 33 C.F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament*, S.C.M. Press, 1970, p. 13. Also O. Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, S.C.M. Press, 1963, p. 223.
- 34 C.F. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- 35 W.R.G. Loader, *New Testament Studies*, vol. 24, 1977/78 'Christ at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in the New Testament', p. 216.
- 36 J.G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, London 1958, p. 18.
- 37 I. Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*, Oxford, 1967, p. 33.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 39 W.K. Lowther Clarke, 'The Clouds of Heaven: an eschatological study', *Theology*, vol. 31, 1935, p. 66.
- 40 C.F. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
- 41 P. Benoit, *Jesus and the Gospel*, vol. I, English translation, London 1973, p. 210.
- 42 W. Barclay, *op. cit.*, p. 174.
- 43 The Sadducees rejected belief in resurrection as unscriptural, see Second Edition/Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity*, U.S.A., 1957, p. 353.
- 44 *Bauer's Encyclopaedia of Biblical Theology*: 'Ascension', London, 1970, p. 41.
- 45 See paragraph seven.