

The Feast of Ascension

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Why do the New Testament writers say that Jesus ascended into “**Heaven**?”

First, the use of the term “heaven” instead of “God” reflects the pious reticence of the Jewish people to refer to God directly. The word “heaven” is a circumlocution or a periphrasis for “God.” That is, the Jewish Christians would not use the word ‘God’ out of respect for God, and so ‘heaven’ was an indirect way of speaking about God. So, for the Jews and for the Jewish Christians, ‘Heaven’ meant ‘God.’ Thus, the ascension of Jesus into heaven would mean that Jesus entered into God’s presence, the presence of his Father (Hebrews 9:24).

Secondly, by stating that Jesus ascended into heaven, the NT writers were addressing yet another controversy that was prevalent among the Jews, the Samaritans, and the Jewish Christians of the first century. Each of these groups had confined God to a particular place or location. For the Jewish people, God first appeared to Moses on Mount **Sinai** (Exodus 24:16) and, later, God dwelt on Mount **Sion**, more precisely, in the Temple of Jerusalem located on Mount **Sion** (Psalm 122:1-2). However, Prophet Elijah travels to Mount **Horeb** to hear God’s voice (1 Kings 19:8-10), whereas the Samaritans believed that God dwelt on Mount **Gerizim** as instructed by Moses (Deuteronomy 11:29).

Coming to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus, as the new Moses, teaches his disciples on a mountain in **Galilee** (Matthew 5:1) and, after his resurrection, appears to his disciples on a mountain, again in **Galilee** (Mt 28:16). This controversy regarding the dwelling place of God was very much alive also in Johannine community (John 4: 20). Now, by stating that Jesus ascended into “Heaven,” the Gospel writers are also putting an end to this controversy regarding God’s dwelling place. They are saying that God’s presence can no longer be confined or limited to any particular location, and no particular race or community can now manipulate or control God’s presence. His presence is universal. The boundaries, to which God was confined, are now broken open, and replaced by the immensity of heaven.

So, God is everywhere. He is omnipresent. Therefore, Mark would say that the Kingdom of God is **near** (Mark 1:14). Matthew says “**where two or three are gathered** in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20). Luke says that the Kingdom of God is **among you** (Luke 17:21). And, John says that God is Spirit and is always found wherever and whenever people worship Him in **spirit and truth** (Jn 4:24). Again, in John’s Gospel, God’s presence can never securely be anchored in any particular location, because the wind (=Spirit) blows where it chooses (John 3:8).

The ascension of Jesus into **heaven** is a doctrinally correct, theologically rich, and spiritually uplifting apostolic pronouncement by the early Christian Church that, with the ascension, God is present to everyone irrespective of religion, caste, class, color, gender, race, or national

boundaries. Everyone - clean or unclean, pure or profane, saint or sinner, good or bad, male, female or trans-gender - has equal access to God, which had already been prophetically announced by the symbolic tearing of the curtain in the Jerusalem Temple into two pieces at the death of Jesus (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). The tearing of the temple curtain into two pieces was already a very bold statement by the authors of the Synoptic Gospels that the distance and separation created between God and his people had finally been eliminated.

So, the ascension of Jesus would mean that, from now on, God's presence can no longer be limited to any particular location, nation, people, or race. Since the whole earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24: 1), wherever we live, we can experience God provided we abide in Him (John 15:4). Moreover, the ground on which we stand is already a holy place (Exodus 3: 5), and so the whole universe is holy and numinous too. And, if God is present everywhere, He is also freely available to everyone, provided they seek God in all sincerity, and in spirit and truth (John 4: 23-24).

An Ascent is always preceded by a Descent

The ascended Jesus was none other than the Jesus who had already descended as we recite in our Creed. Before He could ascend into heaven, it was necessary for him to descend into hell, that is, to the depth of this world (Ephesians 4:9-10). Some sort of descent always precedes an ascent. This descent could be an experience of darkness or some partial blindness that accompanies us in our journey of faith. Metaphors for this sort of descent and partial blindness abound in the Bible – exile, caves, clouds, belly of the whale, incarnation, flight into Egypt, wilderness, desert, tombs, and loss of sight. On Mount Sinai, Moses was able to see God's glory and face only partially (Ex 34:18-23; Dt 4:15). Joseph had to go through many years of descent into slavery in Egypt before he could ascent into new life “to preserve a numerous people” (Genesis 50:20). For the prophet Jonah, his stay in the belly of a fish (Jonah 1:17) and the scorching heat he suffered (Jonah 4: 6-8) were the moments of his descent before he would be able to receive new life.

Experiences of descent abound also in the New Testament. The disciples' experience of the glory of the transfigured Jesus was partially blinded by dazzling white, overshadowing clouds, and debilitating fear (Mk 9:2-13; Mt 17:1-8; Lk 9:28-36). Even in the lives of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Jesus, their ascent was always preceded by moments of descent, that is, a partial and a momentary loss of the numinous presence and glory of God in their life (Lk 2:34-35; Mk 15:34 & Mt 27:46). In the life of Saul, his descent was his being knocked off the horse and the resultant loss of his sight before he could regain his vision and receive the Holy Spirit in order to become the great apostle Paul (Acts 9:8, 17-18).

Besides, the feast of the ascension also teaches us that our life has an eternal and other-worldly dimension. The prayers in the Funeral Liturgy of the Church remind us that our death is not the end of our life, but just a transition to everlasting life. However, an important requirement for this transition to new life is our willingness to free and liberate ourselves from everything we hold onto. Without a letting go, there is no ascension. The risen Jesus had to ask Mary

Magdalene to not hold on to him so that He was free enough to ascend to the Father (Jn 20:17). Without giving up what I already have, I can't receive anything new. Any long journey, whether it be physical, psychological or spiritual, presupposes a departure and a letting go of the familiar. Egypt had to be left behind in order to inherit the Promised Land. The Red Sea had to be navigated in order to mitigate the memory of a life time of slavery and persecution. Babylon had to be abandoned in order to reclaim the lost Jewish land and to ascend onto Mount Sion - the Temple city of Jerusalem. Without some sort of a descent, there is no ascension.

Ascension implies Mission

For a lot of people, the usual tendency is to be **fans** of their heroes or heroines rather than be their **followers**. We are so excited and carried away by the blaze of glory that surrounds our heroes and heroines that this halo of glory fogs our inner vision and obscures our mind. Consequently, we end up becoming the fans of the hero's reputation rather than being followers of their life and teachings, which too soon fade into evanescence and are sadly consigned to eternal oblivion.

During the public ministry of Jesus, on several occasions, rather than trying to follow the spirit of Jesus, the disciples were intrigued by his mighty deeds, and wanted to make him their king. Their focus was not on staying on earth to become his witnesses (Lk 24:48-49; Acts 1:8) and be the salt and light of this world (Mt 5:13-14), but on going to heaven to secure a safe and privileged place for themselves (the request of James and John for a place each on Jesus' right and left: Mk 10:35-37; Mt 20:20-21). Even after being with Jesus for years, they had failed to understand his teachings, their hearts were hardened, and their eyes had failed to see (Mk 8:17-18).

Prophet Elijah, before being taken up into heaven, had asked his disciple Elisha not to follow him to the place from where he would be taken up into heaven by a whirlwind. Elijah didn't want his novice to get enthralled by the spectacular display of the chariot and horses of fire surrounding his departure. Finally, before his departure, Elijah asked Elisha as to what he wanted from the prophet. Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit" (2 Kings 2:9). After Elijah's departure, Elisha picked up the mantle of Elijah and continued his mentor's mission. Yes, it is this double portion of His spirit and charism that the risen Jesus promised his disciples before his ascension so that they would be his **witnesses** (Acts 1:8), not fans.

As we celebrate the feast of the ascension, let us not stay gazing up toward heaven intrigued and enthralled by the clouds and white robes. The ascension was neither meant to be a political moment about restoring the lost political kingdom of David (Acts 1:6-7), nor was it an occasion for euphoria, because no euphoric mood is everlasting. On the contrary, the ascension refers to a theological moment of Christ asking his followers to wait for the heavenly Father to pour out upon them the promised power from on high so that they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5) to be his witnesses (Lk 24:48-49). Besides, this feast was an investiture ceremony at which the risen Jesus asked them to take on his mantle and become his witnesses

(Lk 24:48). The ascension of Jesus is not a privilege to be cherished with a happy-clappy religiosity, but a commissioning to be dared and fulfilled in the service of God's people. Amen.

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