

Ascension Theology

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CHAPTER ONE

The Upward Call



HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN AND IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER. So say the baptized, so says the church; and when they do, they say something no one else has ever said about anyone. Ascension stories abound. One has heard of Enoch, for example, who walked with God and then vanished, 'because God took him'. One has heard also of Elijah, whom Yahweh caught up to heaven in a whirlwind. Pagan tales of apotheosis, gnostic redeemer myths, Muhammad's rumoured night journey – all sorts of examples can be found. One has even heard quite recently of the ascent of Man. But 'he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father' – that is something which, taken in context, is without parallel. By context I mean the sequence of events in which the ascension is lodged in the Christian creed, *viz.*, crucifixion, descent to the dead, resurrection, ascension, heavenly session, parousia and judgement. This combination of claims about Jesus makes his story utterly unique, in each of its parts as well as in the whole. But if unique, I hasten to add, by no means unanticipated.

To begin to understand the story of Jesus we can and should go back as far as the legend of Enoch, and even further. Indeed we must go all the way back to Eden, to that cosmic mountain on which was planted the garden where the very first humans are said to have walked and talked with God. For in Eden begins the pattern of descent and ascent that provides the main story-line of the holy scriptures, a story-line that reaches its climax in Jesus and his ascension into heaven.

Now according to Genesis the first man and woman were not, as we are, in bondage to death. The open horizon of divine blessing lay before them. For their disobedience, however, they were cast out of paradise and lived with their progeny in the plains below, east of Eden 'in the land of sepulture' (as Irenaeus somewhere describes this world of ours). Their way back to the garden was blocked by the flashing swords of the cherubim, for through them nature itself had become twisted and distorted, unfit for the presence of God, unready for his blessing. When the wickedness of the descendants of Cain, who had settled in Nod, reached its apogee, and even the sons of Seth had become unfruitful and corrupt, God sent a great flood to carry them all away into the abyss. But as the waters of judgement rose up and up, a single righteous man – one who like Enoch still walked with God – was carried in the ark 'high above the earth'. To Noah and his household new horizons were granted. Yet the mountain

where the ark landed immediately became the witness to a new act of faithlessness and disobedience. As Noah's own descendants spread out in the plains below and to the east of Ararat, they too increased in wickedness. One expression of this was their attempt to construct in Shinar an eternal city, with a tower that would reach to heaven: a new Eden of human design, which as it climbed felt the heat of the cherubim, and came to nought in confusion and strife.

This pattern of descent and ascent, ascent and descent, continues as we pass from cosmopolitan history (couched initially, as need be, in the language of myth) to salvation history. Out of the new dispersion which follows the débâcle at Babel, Abram is called up from Ur of the Chaldees into the hills of Canaan, where the promise of divine blessing upon man is renewed.¹ But the heirs of the promise, the offspring of the miracle child Isaac, soon go down to the plains of the Nile to suffer their centuries of servitude in Egypt. Brought up again by the mighty hand of God, having passed through the deep on dry ground (that is, through the waters of judgement that swallow up Pharaoh's army), they make their rendezvous at Sinai. There Aaron and the seventy elders are invited to dine in Yahweh's presence while Moses ascends to the peak of the mountain, lost from view for forty days in the glory cloud which rests upon it. Down below the people dance round their golden fertility god, and waste away in the desert. Not until Yahweh establishes on Mount Zion the throne of David, and David the tabernacle of Yahweh, does it begin to seem that the cherubim might at last drop their guard, and Eden reappear: 'Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.'²

The story takes another downward turn, however, beginning with the fall of David, who from the vantage point of the palace's rooftop garden covets Bathsheba. It ends with the sack of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and a return to the floodplains of Shinar.³ The sequel follows suit. Hoping to encourage the unhappy exiles, the prophet Isaiah predicts the demise of the Babylonian pretender – no King of glory he!

1 Lot foolishly chooses the Edenic illusion provided by the plain of the Jordan 'towards the East', which was well watered 'like the garden of Yahweh' (Gen. 13:10ff.).

2 Psalm 24 (New International Version), q.v. in full.

3 See W. Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis*, 68ff.

You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven;
 I will raise my throne above the stars of God.
 I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
 on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.
 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
 I will make myself like the Most High.'
 But you are brought down to the grave,
 to the depths of the pit.⁴

Afterwards, under a more benevolent Persian regime, a tiny pilgrimage led by Nehemiah ascends Zion once more to restore the walls of Jerusalem and its temple to Yahweh. Then (under the wretched Antiochus?⁵) a seer sees a vision of 'one like a son of man', standing tall among the beast-nations which rend and devour God's people. Like Daniel himself, this figure is a hero personifying that people. He represents the new Adam, the new humanity, that God is wanting to mould out of the stubborn and resistant material of Israel. He is called upwards into the divine presence to receive what was promised long ago. He is seen 'coming with the clouds of heaven', approaching the Ancient of Days to receive glory and sovereignty over the earth, a dominion that will never pass away.⁶ But the new Man comes bearing the standards of the invading Roman army, and after a lengthy occupation the legions of Titus tear down again what Nehemiah had raised up.

Descent and ascent, ascent and descent. It is worth noticing that Israel's most sacred liturgy – that of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement – answered to this pattern. The high priest, by an elaborate series of steps, would ascend annually into the sanctuary of God, into the holy of holies, to present the blood of atonement at the mercy seat. From there, if all went well, he would carry the divine blessing to the people waiting outside.⁷ Descent and ascent, ascent and descent: the pattern had, even in Israel, the closed horizon of the circle – almost, we might say, the monotony of the wheel of fate. For the Hebrew cultus effectively perpetuated the standoff that existed with Yahweh. Year after year Israel's representative was

4 14:13f. (NIV)

5 Or, as now seems more likely, sometime before Antiochus.

6 Dan. 7:13f.; cf. Ps. 110:1 and see also Isaiah 11f.

7 The nature and pattern of the priestly ministry is established in Leviticus 9f.; cf. chap. 16.

received into intimacy with God and granted an audience; year after year he was put out again. Not that the task of the cultus was merely to sanctify the yawning gap between promise and reality. In its own way it was oriented to the eschaton; it pointed ahead to the closure of that gap in the coming kingdom of God. Were that not the truth of the matter, were expectations of arrival at the destiny foreseen by Daniel not constantly rekindled in the life and worship of Israel, we should have no occasion to speak of *salvation* history at all. Indeed, we should be tempted to revert to the history-rejecting beliefs and rituals of the Gentiles, for whom time was strictly a cyclical affair and fate absolute. Yet the gap itself remained, and with it the need for this priestly descent and ascent.

Israel's sense of expectation was rooted, not in any abstract conviction that history itself had a purpose or goal, but in the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh. Naturally enough, then, the form which that sense of expectation took was increasingly messianic, in keeping with the specific terms of the promises made to King David, who represented the true high point of covenantal history.⁸ Embodied in the prayers and hymns of Israel, as in the visions of its prophets and seers, was an anticipation that one day would come that very special person of destiny who, by the grace of God, would fully redeem those promises and fulfill the Davidic dream:

The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at [the rulers of the nations].
Then he rebukes them in his wrath, saying,
'I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill.'
I will proclaim [to them] the decree of Yahweh:
He said to me, 'You are my son;
today I have become your Father.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.'⁹

Of his kingdom there would be no end, and in his time the marriage of heaven and earth, which had never yet been consummated, would

8 See 2 Sam. 5–8, especially chap. 7; cf. Rev. 22:16.

9 Ps 2:4–8 (adapted from the NIV) takes up the language of 2 Sam. 7:14. Surely Josephus' attempt to find in Vespasian this person of destiny can only be regarded as a quite astonishing betrayal of the Jewish hope (cf. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 376).

take place, with Zion standing in for Eden.¹⁰ Psalm 110, which later became the touchstone of Christian messianism, went so far as to predict that this person would have a priestly as well as a kingly role. Like the mysterious king of Salem in days of yore, he would unite the functions of the two historic institutions by which the divine blessings were mediated to Israelite society.

Yahweh said to my lord,
 ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’
 Yahweh commits to you the sceptre of your power:
 reign from Zion in the midst of your enemies.
 Noble are you from the day of your birth upon the holy hill,
 radiant are you even from the womb in the morning dew of your youth.
 Yahweh has sworn and will not turn back:
 ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’¹¹

Since the throne to which he would ascend would be as the heavenly throne itself – since he would sit with God, so to speak, presiding over the union of heaven and earth – he would surpass and render obsolete the Aaronic priesthood, the priesthood of the gap. And having ascended he would no more descend, at least not in the usual way.¹²

AGAINST THIS BACKDROP, or something like it (obviously I have sketched in bold lines just a few of its contours), the story of Jesus was consciously told. That is everywhere apparent in the New Testament, not least in those documents most attuned to the gentile mission. Let us take Luke–Acts, for example, by far the largest work. Luke appears to structure his entire contribution so as to draw out a parallel with David. Already in the birth narratives an analogy is set up between the stories of Samuel and David and those of the Baptist

10 The walls of the temple ‘were adorned with figures of the guardian cherubim, palm trees and flowers’, graphically portraying the intention that the temple in Zion should replace the garden sanctuary as the centre of the universe (W. J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning*, 52). But this aim, as the prophets soon realized, would never be fulfilled by Solomon’s temple. It would require a completely new temple established by Yahweh himself, one isolated from the corrupted structures of the monarchical period (ibid., 59). Indeed, it would require a new creation.

11 Ps. 110:1-4 (adapted from the Liturgical Psalter).

12 Cf. Ps. 16:8ff. On Melchizedek, see Genesis 14 and Hebrews 7–8; see also Farrow, ‘Melchizedek and Modernity’, *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. R. J. Bauckham et al., 281–301.

and Jesus. Then, after Jesus is anointed with the Spirit for his messianic role, we find him wandering like David on the borders of the land, skirmishing with the various enemies that oppress the people of God. As 'the time for his ascension' approaches, he resolutely sets out to conquer the stronghold of Jerusalem.¹³ He too ascends Zion triumphantly and is enthroned there. But his throne is a cross; his ascent is already a descent.

That is the great twist in the plot, in the Christian telling of Israel's story, and it is immediately followed by another. Jesus rises from the dead on the third day – not, like David or the rest of the righteous, at the end of the age – and ascends into heaven itself. His throne is established at God's right hand. As Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost is designed to show, that establishment is just what David dreamed of but never achieved.¹⁴ That it has implications both for the people of God and for the whole human race is the burden of Luke's second volume, which is hinged to the first by the twice-told story of the ascension.¹⁵ The book of the Acts of the Apostles describes the progress of Jesus' servants throughout the Roman Empire and among all the nations, just as David's loyal men once carved out for him a secure kingdom between the Jordan and the sea.

It may be added that in each of the synoptic Gospels the crucial episodes of baptism and the transfiguration already point to the fundamental pattern of descent and ascent,¹⁶ long before we actually come to the passion story and to the miraculous events that follow. Jesus' entire ministry takes place between the abyss and the mountaintop. Thus are we slowly but carefully prepared for its climax – the cross, the resurrection, and finally the ascension, which is the proper

13 Lk. 9:51; cf. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 379f.

14 'For David did not ascend into heaven', says Peter (Acts 2:34), quoting Psalm 110. Behind this lies 2 Samuel 7 and the question as to who would establish whose house: David, Yahweh's or Yahweh, David's? In the event – the event of one who makes *himself* the temple of the Spirit, and is ultimately brought by the Spirit into the Father's presence – both are true.

15 In the first account (Lk. 24:50ff.) the overtones are priestly; in the second (Acts 1:1-11) they are kingly or magisterial. Cf. J. G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, 24ff., and M. Parsons, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts*. M. Sleeman, who in *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* builds on Parsons, expands on the importance of the ascension motif but does not take up the David analogy, as he might have. (While happy to discover that Sleeman has built on *Ascension and Ecclesia* as well, I am not persuaded that theologians are quite so 'insensitive to narrative position' as he seems to think; cf. 6, 18ff.)

16 See Lk. 9:28ff.

outcome of his messianic career. To be sure, in Matthew and Mark the ascension does not feature so prominently as in Luke–Acts, and this is often taken by modern scholars as a reason for not allowing it much attention. The doctrine of the ascension, it is sometimes said, is just another way of talking about the resurrection. But to take such a line is not only to marginalize Luke but also to ignore both the general witness of the scriptures and the logic of the Gospels in question. Since Matthew and Mark have not themselves taken up the task of writing about what Jesus continued ‘to do and to teach’,¹⁷ there are different literary and theological pressures on their concluding sections. Yet the ascension is by no means passed over, nor is it conflated with the resurrection. Rather, appropriate variations on the theme offer a rich texture of complementary perspectives.

Matthew works not with David, but with Moses, as his main christological type. Not surprisingly, then, his version of the story concludes with Jesus on a mountain somewhere on the fringe of the promised land, blessing and commissioning his disciples as Moses once blessed Joshua and the leaders of the tribes. As in the case of Moses, whose last act was to ascend Mount Nebo, Jesus’ final resting place is known only to God, who, we may assume, carries him thither. But that resting place is no secret grave, as (*pace* Josephus and the Jewish tradition) it was for Moses. For Jesus has already conquered death, the last enemy of God’s people.¹⁸ The implication of Matthew’s ending is clear enough, and we will return to it when we come in a moment to the epistle to the Hebrews. Matthew does not spoil the rhetorical effect by trying to spell it out.

Mark is rather more pointed. He introduces the language and imagery of Daniel into the synoptic tradition, with ascension imagery being especially prominent. We may take as the best example the following excerpt from Jesus’ trial, as he is questioned by the high priest on the eve of his awful descent into the abyss of God-forsakenness: “Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One?” “I am”, said Jesus, “and you shall see the son of man seated at the right hand of the Power [on high] and coming with the clouds of heaven.”¹⁹ The primary reference here, as some have suggested, may well be to the

17 Cf. Acts 1:1f.

18 Hence the mission of the disciples is in the opposite direction to that of Joshua – out of the land and into the wide world beyond it. Cf. Mt. 28:16ff. and Deuteronomy 32ff. (especially 34:9); for Josephus’ account of Moses’ alleged ascension, see *Antiquities* 4.8.48.

19 Mk 14:62; cf. 8:38, 13:26f. See also Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, 34ff.

judgement on Jerusalem foreseen by Jesus and fulfilled in AD 70, but there can be no doubt that the prediction itself hinges on the actual deliverance and vindication of Jesus; that is, on his resurrection and ascent to the Father. We do not need the unreliable and somewhat anticlimactic longer ending, which makes the allusion explicit,²⁰ to recognize the import of this regular Markan refrain.

Of all the evangelists, however, it is John who makes the most of the descent–ascent motif, and of the ascension itself. That may at first glance seem an odd claim, since the fourth Gospel tells neither the story of the ascension nor those of the baptism and transfiguration. Like the institution of the eucharist (a mystery joined to that of the ascension in 6:62) all these events are simply assumed by John, who takes it as his task to interpret them through the medium of dialogues and monologues. Early on, Jesus is introduced to us quite openly as the one who has gone up into heaven, and who indeed (in another sense) came down from heaven; as the one who is essentially defined by his place ‘at the Father’s side’.²¹ To this a priestly dimension is added when his body is spoken of as the temple in which an altogether decisive liturgy is to be conducted.²² He is even portrayed, like Eden itself, as an oasis in the wilderness where the glory of God can be found, a garden on a mountain from which the whole earth can be watered:

On the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture said, from his belly will flow rivers of living water.’ This he said concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in him were about to receive; for the Spirit was not yet, since Jesus was not yet glorified.²³

To be that oasis Jesus must first ‘sanctify’ himself for our sake, stooping so low as to allow himself to be lifted up on a cross by sinners; but in and through this mock ascent he will also be lifted up by God as the beginning of a new creation. The divine lifting up begins with his resurrection, naturally, but its true goal is a homecoming – reception

20 Mk 16:19

21 Literally, ‘in the Father’s bosom’ (1:18; cf. 3:13, 13:3).

22 Jn 2:13–22; cf. the allusion to Jacob’s ladder in 1:59.

23 Jn 7:37–39. It is a pity that Northrup Frye missed this vital key to biblical symbolism in his fine book, *The Great Code*.

in the Father's house – as the famous farewell discourse in chapters 14ff. makes plain. The point is powerfully reinforced in chapter 20: 'Stop holding me', says the risen one when embraced by the astonished and delighted Mary, 'for I have not yet ascended to my Father; go rather and say to my brothers, "I ascend to my Father and your Father, my God and your God!"'²⁴

What John emphasizes is that Jesus' destiny is our destiny; or rather that, in reaching our destiny, he has reached it not only for himself but also for us. Long before the Gospels were in circulation, of course, St Paul had already got hold of that point, just as he had also proclaimed the good news of Jesus' enthronement and the coming subjugation of his enemies in every corner of the cosmos.²⁵ He communicated it to his friends in Philippi in the following words: 'Forgetting the things behind, and stretching towards the things ahead, I press on according to the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.'²⁶ Now the prize of the upward call is just what Israel had been denied at Sinai, the mediation of Moses notwithstanding:

Yahweh descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and Yahweh said to him, 'Go down and warn the people so that they do not force their way through to see Yahweh and many of them perish . . .' Moses said to Yahweh, 'The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, "Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy."²⁷

But in connection with Jesus the upward call is freely extended to all who are near and all who are far off. That is because the one who has ascended is in this case one who 'also descended into the lower parts of the earth',²⁸ effecting a complete sanctification. And having reached the goal which his predecessors did not – having been raised from the

²⁴ Verse 17; cf. 1:11-13, 14:1ff., 20:22.

²⁵ See Phil. 2:9ff.; cf. Eph. 1:19ff., 1 Pet. 3:22.

²⁶ Phil. 3:13f. The prize in question may be the *ἀνω κλησις* or upward call itself, or that which awaits the one who receives the call; it makes little difference to the sense.

²⁷ Exod. 19:20ff. (adapted from the *NIV*); cf. Acts 5:31.

²⁸ That is, who 'was crucified, died and was buried' and 'descended to the dead', as the creed has it. See Eph. 4:9f., a passage to which we will later return in another connection.

dead and welcomed into the Father’s house – he is able to arrange there a welcome for others. ‘I go to prepare a place for you.’²⁹

Just here we also have the guiding idea of the epistle to the Hebrews, whose author must be ranked together with John and Paul among the great theologians of the early church. It has been suggested (on the basis of the synagogue lectionary) that Hebrews is a Pentecost sermon, and that may well be the case, but it would certainly do just as nicely as a sermon for Ascension Day.³⁰ A quick glance at its rhetorical structure reveals that Hebrews is more interested in the achievement on which Pentecost rests; that is, on Jesus’ passage through the veil that separates a holy God from his sinful creatures:

We have
a high priest who
sat down at the right hand (8:1)

Draw near (4:16)

Sharers of a heavenly
calling, concentrate
on Jesus (3:1)

He sat down at the right
hand of the Majesty
in heaven (1:3)



Draw near (10:22)

Let us run . . . fixing
our eyes on Jesus
(12:1f.)

Since we are receiving a
kingdom . . . let us be
grateful (12:28)

By the author’s own testimony in the pivotal passage, the main point he wants to make is that ‘we do have a high priest such as this, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord built not man.’ On the basis of the unique ministry of the ascended one we too may be assured of coming safely to the place to which neither Moses nor Aaron nor Joshua nor David could ever lead us.³¹

In other words, the writer of Hebrews picks up more or less where

²⁹ Jn 14:2; cf. Rom. 8:34, Col. 3:1ff.

³⁰ Ascension Day is of course a later development, as is the rest of the Christian calendar; but it is ontologically and theologically more fundamental (cf. Eph. 4:7ff.).

³¹ See chapters 3–4.

Matthew, quite self-consciously, leaves off. Recognizing that Jesus has gone where no other has yet been able to go – to the promised and longed-for rest, to the Paradise that exists in God’s own presence – he develops a pastoral theology for the people of the new exodus, based on Jesus’ heavenly ministry. For this the typologies of Matthew and Luke are inadequate. Taking up the Melchizedek motif from Psalm 110, he shows how Jesus actively sustains the link between his own destiny and ours from his place at the Father’s side, that God may succeed at ‘bringing many sons to glory’.³² In doing so, he accentuates the priestly office of the messiah in a way unmatched elsewhere. It is worth noticing that the heavenly liturgy of Jesus continues to be construed by way of analogy with Yom Kippur, with one decisive difference: that, when our high priest re-emerges from the sanctuary ‘not built with hands’, he will do so not as one who is himself put out of the sanctuary, but as one who will exorcize from the whole creation all that is not fit to be brought into that sanctuary. In his reappearance he will bring with him the fullness of God’s blessing, and of God’s judgement. This then will be a descent of a very different kind, for in Jesus the stalemate between God and his people has been broken.³³

AS A COLLECTION of literature deeply rooted in the Jewish scriptures and their presuppositions, the New Testament tells and interprets the story of Jesus in a perfectly natural way as a story that reaches its climax – though not of course its conclusion – with his ascension into heaven. This is the same story that the church regularly repeats to herself, before going out to share it with the world, when she comes together in eucharistic assembly. For those who gather round the Lord’s table do so precisely in order to anticipate ‘the upward call of God in Christ Jesus’. Nowhere is that privilege captured more succinctly than in Hebrews 12, with its sharp contrasts and expansive imagery: ‘You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm . . . But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God the judge of all men, to

32 See 2:5ff. (esp. 9f.), 4:14ff.

33 See 6:19ff., 9:11ff., 12:14ff. (esp. 25ff.); cf. Acts 3:17ff., 1 Thess. 4:13ff.

the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.³⁴

Alongside Hebrews 12, however, we might well set the opening chapters of the Apocalypse, which are fairly bursting with eucharistic meaning and with the promise of the ascension. 'On the Lord's day,' says John, 'I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a great voice like a trumpet.'³⁵ Turning to discover the source of that voice, he is confronted by the Melchizedekian figure of Jesus, in a vision that completely overwhelms him and leaves him as one dead. Restored to his senses by a touch from the priestly hand, however, John receives that peculiar upward call of the prophet or seer:

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it . . .³⁶

Near to the one sitting on the throne the same figure appears in a different aspect, as the Lamb slain – slain, yet standing very much alive in the presence of God and in the centre of all creation. This is the one whom the dragon waited to devour, but who was 'snatched up to God and to his throne'.³⁷ This is the one who alone in all the universe can open the seals on the scroll of destiny. This is the one who cries out to his faithful witnesses, the martyrs, 'Come up here!' And they too stand on their feet and ascend to heaven in a cloud, safe from the clutches of death and of what men mistakenly call the eternal city.³⁸

With evocative scenes such as these fresh in our minds, and with the wider testimony of scripture in view, we may join the faithful down through the ages in celebrating, with unaffected enthusiasm,

34 Heb. 12:18ff. (NIV)

35 Rev. 1:10 appears to contradict Heb. 12:19 by drawing on Sinai in a more positive way, but the conflict is superficial. The voice heard at the Lord's table is not a different voice than Sinai's, which the people could not bear and 'begged that no further word be spoken to them'. It is the same voice sounding in and through Jesus Christ.

36 Rev. 4:1f. (NIV); cf. Exod. 24:9-11, where eating, drinking and seeing God are the prize of the upward call.

37 Rev. 12:5 (NIV), a text powerfully portrayed by Benjamin West in a painting that hangs in the Princeton University Art Museum.

38 Rev. 11:12; cf. Acts 7:54ff.

Christ's 'mighty resurrection and glorious ascension'.³⁹ But what exactly are we celebrating? That is not immediately clear from the biblical material, and certainly not from mysterious works like the Apocalypse. Nor is it something about which there has always been agreement.

39 Prayer of consecration, *Book of Common Prayer*.

CHAPTER TWO

Re-imaginings



IN JERUSALEM, ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES, stands a small domed shrine. It is of course the Chapel of the Ascension. Within its dark and cramped interior one is directed to a footprint-like depression in the rock, said to be the exact point from which Christ parted from his disciples and from our world – as if he sprang into the heavens with such vigour that the very rock underneath his feet was compressed in the act!¹ If this conjures up an absurdly literal interpretation of the ascension, it may be remarked that such have been with us from relatively early days. The New Testament itself shows remarkable reserve, to be sure. Even Luke's insistence that 'he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight' is quite circumspect when compared with the so-called Epistle of the Apostles, for example, or with certain strands of sacred art.² But while we might make allowances for the artist, or indeed for the pre-scientific commentator, it must be admitted that the doctrine of the ascension, if construed along Lukan lines at all, is something of an embarrassment in the age of the telescope and the space probe; indeed, of evolutionary theory and faith in global progress. Truth be told, it is an embarrassment also in the age of pluralism and post-colonialism, of feminism and ecofeminism, and other reactionary movements of late modernity.³

Rudolf Bultmann's famous claim that a man with a wireless and a scientific world view could no longer take seriously Jesus' ascension into heaven – or rather, that in order to take it seriously he must first allow it, like much else in the Gospels, to be demythologized – was one attempt to face that embarrassment squarely and, at the same time, to point towards a more spiritually authentic reading of the story of Jesus.⁴ *Pace* Bultmann, however, neither the difficulty nor the solution is peculiarly modern. Long before the radio or even the telescope, a very un-Lukan view of the ascension was already emerging, partly because of the fact that a tangible body rising up into the

1 The tired camel which at my visit was kneeling outside, as if in prayer that it not be burdened by tourists on a hot day, provided a suitable contrast – it looked as if it could not be raised with a crane!

2 Acts 1:9 (NIV). *Epistula Apostolorum* (cf. 21, 51) is a second-century anti-gnostic document.

3 The pluralist may object that the doctrine of the ascension is triumphalist, though surely it is hardly more so than the liberal doctrine of progress; the feminist may object that it is just another example of sexism (Grace Jantzen, 'Ascension and the Road to Hell', *Theology*, May–June 1991, 164f.).

4 See *Kerygma and Myth* (ed. H. W. Bartsch), chap. 1.

heavens was no more congenial to the ancient world view (literalists notwithstanding) than to the modern.

Early in the third century the brilliant Alexandrian theologian, Origen, offered the following advice, which would have been especially welcome to anyone troubled by the thought of a corporeal substance passing into a realm that by definition was for spiritual substances only. Let us seek, he says, ‘to understand in a mystical sense the words at the end of the Gospel according to John, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father”, thinking of the ascension of the Son to the Father in a manner more befitting his divinity, with sanctified perspicuity, as an ascension of the mind rather than of the body.’⁵ Origen here sets in motion a long tradition in ascension theology, of which Bultmann is arguably a representative. ‘Ascension of the mind’ is one of the two basic paradigms used down through the centuries to interpret the outcome of Jesus’ history, and it is a quite flexible one, capable of absorbing (or adjusting to) all sorts of scientific advances. It is a view we need to look into, beginning with the context in which it arose. Though that will mean traversing quickly some difficult terrain, the journey will prove profitable later on.

DESCENT AND ASCENT SCHEMES are hardly the special property of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. They are the very stuff of religious speculation and mythology of all kinds, reflecting and interpreting (as they generally do) the patterns or cycles of nature and of human experience.⁶ For our purposes the two most notable such schemes of Origen’s day were that employed by the gnostic sects, on the one hand, and the more philosophical variety of his teacher, Ammonius Saccas, on the other – viz., the emerging Neoplatonism best represented by one of Saccas’ younger pupils, the famous Plotinus.⁷ Origen sought to articulate the Christian scheme in

5 *On Prayer* 23.2. It is worth noticing that the context is a treatise on prayer, not on cosmology. The two are not unrelated, however, and in a moment I will try to show how this proposal fits into Origen’s wider theological world view.

6 Catherine Playoust expands on a few of these patterns in her Harvard dissertation, ‘Lifted up from the earth: The Ascension of Jesus and the Heavenly Ascents of Early Christians’. While I do not agree with her reading of certain biblical and patristic texts, or share her views on their relation to texts of gnostic provenance, her work helps to make the point that Jesus’ ascension was often assimilated to existing cosmological schemes.

7 There is no need to draw a sharp line between Middle Platonism (an eclectic movement drawing on Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, etc., to which Origen was already exposed by Clement) and Neoplatonism; Saccas himself was apparently a transitional figure. Nor

dispute with the former variety and in dialogue with the latter, which inevitably led to some interesting alterations to the biblical picture.

The schemes just mentioned were at once cosmological and psychological; which is to say, they correlated the dynamic of the universe with the drama of the human soul. For the gnostics that drama was played out on the stage set for it by the occurrence of a fault in the realm of divine being, through which this evil world of ours – the realm of mere becoming, of decay, suffering and death – had come into existence, or rather had fallen *from* existence.⁸ From our world the spirits of select individuals were destined to escape, being freed from its toils through the aid of a saviour who would teach them how to return to the heavenly Fullness which was their true origin and home. This descending and ascending saviour they often identified as the Christ. By this they did not mean Jesus of Nazareth, however, who himself was a mere mortal, but the invisible emissary who spoke through him.⁹ For the gnostics, what was important about Jesus was the secret teaching that he passed on to his disciples, not the man himself or his cross, resurrection and ascension. These latter events they indeed denied, since they did not believe that the body (or the temporal–material realm as such) was redeemable. Ascending was not something one did or could do in the *body*. It was strictly an affair of the inner man, to be anticipated in this life by those initiated into the secrets, but to be fulfilled only in death.

The popularity of gnosticism may be difficult for a modern to understand, until he or she recalls the parasitical forms of vaguely Christian belief which are widely available today through the same sort of cross-fertilization between eastern and western religious ideas that took place during the *pax Romana*. There were of course at that time those who sought something less quirky and more philosophically sophisticated (though the gnosticism of Basilides and Valentinus could certainly be the latter). For them the evolving ideas of the

for present purposes do we need to distinguish sharply between the various gnostic gurus and sects, though it may be observed that Basilides (who had also lectured in Alexandria) offered a quite distinct and moderate view.

- 8 On some accounts, this fault occurred in the female aspect of the divine pleroma and was portrayed in sexual (and sexist) stories. Underlying all such stories, however, was the old metaphysical opposition between being and becoming, between the one and the many.
- 9 We should be careful here about an over-literal reading of the gnostic myths. In one sense the emissary *is* the myth, which properly told and heard has its redemptive effect on the inner man.

Platonists offered a more attractive option. The new Platonists did not trouble themselves with Jesus.¹⁰ Nor did they share the gnostic pessimism or fatalism. The world we inhabit, the world of multiplicity and of changing phenomena, was regarded as the natural product of descending emanations from the divine – that is, from the absolute simplicity of pure being – which they called ‘the One’. The individual human comprised a sort of microcosm in which body, soul and mind represented advancing degrees of being, and hence of potential for union with the One, training for which was man’s moral and intellectual vocation. Here too ascent was a matter for the inner self, for the soul and for the mind, in which the traces of divinity were to be found; but it was at least allowed that the phenomenal world might to some extent reflect the mind’s advance.

In such ideas Origen found some of the ingredients for an antidote to gnosticism, and for a cultured Christianity that might make better headway among the educated classes. On the other hand, he recognized that the Platonists did not take the problem of evil seriously enough – even if they were to be commended for not making the gnostic mistake of attributing our world to a defective deity!¹¹ Without blaming its Creator, the world’s inequalities and injustices and suffering had to be accounted for. Origen himself argued, then, that the temporal–material world was not meant to be. It came about as the result of the breakdown of an original creation in which the souls of all living creatures had once been completely absorbed in the contemplation of God. Between them, since they had but one goal, there was no distinction in kind or in form; but falling away from God in differing degrees they took on differing conditions of bodily existence, some finer (the angels), some grosser (men, animals, etc.). That they did so, however, was an expression of the benevolence of God, who brought the present creation into existence as a school for the reformation of souls. Through their various trials in the body its pupils were invited to turn their attention upwards again to God, and so to ascend gradually through the ranks of creation to the situation from which they fell.¹²

Origen’s alteration of the biblical story, and of the descent–ascent

10 Saccas himself is thought by some to have been a lapsed Christian.

11 That is, a corrupt demiurge. This view should not be attributed to Basilides, whose teachings about providence, and about the connection between suffering and sin, to some extent anticipated Origen’s.

12 The integrity of the Creator, the responsibility of the creature – these are what Origen

motif that runs through it, thus begins with a radically different reading of the opening chapters of Genesis. This re-imagining of the narrative about human beginnings (putting the fall prior to creation) is eventually answered by his ‘sanctified’ reading of the Christ-narrative and its implications for human endings.¹³ Who is Jesus Christ? Where did he come from and where did he go? How will we follow him? According to Origen, Jesus is the human embodiment of the one soul that did *not* fall away, a soul eternally united to the divine Logos, a soul who descended freely in pursuit of the fallen in order to show them the way back home. Against both the gnostics and the philosophers, then, Origen bravely insists on faith in the incarnate and crucified one as the necessary foundation for our own upward call.¹⁴ But that call – on this point all are in agreement – is to ascension of the mind, since only the mind is capable of participation in the Logos. We must understand ascension not so much as a change of place as of state, he suggests, to which there must correspond a series of transformations of the body in which its material and temporal dimensions are gradually stripped away, having fulfilled their purpose. That is what happened to Jesus and what will also happen to us if we imitate him. For ascent is simply the reversal of descent, nothing more; and in that reversal there is also a reversal of the material creation. There will be, remarks Origen wryly, no hairdressers in heaven.¹⁵

Once again a modern person (even a modern Christian) might be excused for finding some of this a little bewildering, but we cannot pause to consider its finer points. We need only observe that according to Origen there is not one gospel, but two: the temporal gospel, for the simple, which treats of Christ’s work in the flesh; and the

sought to underscore as he steered a middle course between the heretics and the philosophers.

- 13 *On First Principles* explains all the above, as well as the hermeneutical theory by which he justifies such readings; among other things he maintains (4.9.2) that scripture includes things which did not actually happen in order to signal the reader to seek a higher, mystical sense.
- 14 Bravely, I say, yet not so bravely as more orthodox theologians, since he wants to talk about the incarnation of the soul united to the Logos rather than of the Logos *per se* (*First Principles* 2.6). Still, he has decisively rejected gnostic views of the saviour, while putting it to the philosophers as well that it is not the spark of divinity in our own soul – the god within us – but the Christ whom we ought to regard as our true Teacher.
- 15 See J. Trigg, *Origen*, 114; cf. *First Principles* 2.3, 2.10, 3.6, 4.4. But see also J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 469ff.

eternal gospel, for the wise, which treats of his invisible heavenly glory. Only as we progress beyond thinking about the saviour *κατὰ σαρκά*, as Paul said – according to the flesh rather than the spirit – do we begin to grasp the eternal gospel and so to commence in earnest our own ascension. Origen thus invites us to conceive of the ascended one, not in terms of his human particularity, as we would the crucified one, but in terms of his godlike ability ‘to fill the universe’, to run through the whole of creation restoring all to its original condition.¹⁶ Later on we shall have to ask whether this is really Paul’s meaning, and whether he would have been happy with the distinction between a temporal and an eternal gospel. But for now we must continue to follow the path marked out for us by Origen, which not only extends into the modern period but eventually broadens out into something much more familiar.

THE CRITICS OF ORIGEN have always been numerous and vocal, as have his defenders. St Augustine of Hippo, whose stature as a theologian exceeds even that of Origen, may be put down among the former. In his last great work, *The City of God against the Pagans*, he rebukes the Alexandrian for some of the philosophical assumptions he has retained from Hellenic thought, and especially for the notion of the pre-existence of souls that is so fundamental to his whole scheme of things. He insists on Christ’s ascension in the flesh – that other, more primitive, paradigm which we will explore in chapter three – and pokes fun at the ‘ponderous’ arguments of the ‘little coterie of skeptics’ who still want to deny that a corporeal body could rise to the highest heavens, or that those heavens could open to receive it.¹⁷ But Augustine is not an altogether effective opponent. Indeed, to understand the progress of the Origenist option in the Middle Ages and beyond, it is necessary to consider his somewhat ambiguous contribution.

It would not be unfair to comment that Augustine, who like Origen stands as an enormous pillar of learning at the crossroads of the late classical and the Christian era, was slow to shed some of his own Platonic assumptions; or to notice that his remarks on the ascension are sometimes more witty than weighty. What most needs

16 Cf. *First Principles* 2.6.7, 2 Cor. 5:16; *Princ.* 2.11.6, Ephesians 4:11; *Princ.* 4.3.13 and editor’s note 7.

17 See *City of God*, books 11 and 21ff.; cf. *Faith and the Creed* §13.

to be said, however, is that what Augustine insists upon he also to a certain extent undermines, at least in his earlier writings. We are to believe, he says, in bodily ascension. But what was the point of that marvellous event? To remove from the disciples the stumbling block of his humanity, in order that they might come to a robust faith in his divinity. Labouring in the wake of the great Nicene controversy, Augustine sometimes offers a very different reading of Jn 20:17 than that which we were assuming in chapter one. In certain places there is little thought (though it can be found elsewhere in Augustine) of Jesus our brother opening up for us the true destiny of man. The thought is rather that we must not cling to him as a man, but allow him to appear to us as God. 'Through the man Christ you go to the God Christ', says Augustine, and only thus to the Father.¹⁸ The ascension, in other words, enables us to look past the human Jesus to the eternal Logos.

Already we are in Origen's territory. Indeed, from a different starting point and for different reasons, we have come to the same conclusion, simply by shifting our focus from the objective pole to the subjective pole. The ascension happens to Jesus in the body that it may happen to us in the mind. It is something that happens for us only in so far as it also happens in us: 'Therefore he has ascended for us, when we rightly understand him. At that time he ascended once only but now he ascends every day.'¹⁹ Augustine's earlier treatments of the ascension thus contribute both to the internalizing or subjectification of the doctrine and to the marginalization of the humanity of the risen Lord, which together characterize Origen's approach. The bishop assures us that the Lord himself expects us 'to press on, and instead of weakly clinging to temporal things, even though these have been put on and worn by him for our salvation, to pass over them quickly and struggle to attain to himself, who has freed our nature from the bondage of temporal things, and has set it down at the right hand of his Father.'²⁰

18 'Where you are to abide, He is God; on your way thither, He is man' (Sermon 261; cf. Sermon 264). Christ's human nature, and faith in that human nature, is necessary only 'for our weakness'.

19 Sermon 246

20 *Christian Doctrine* 1.38 (see W. Marvee, *The Ascension of Christ in the Works of St. Augustine*, 99ff.). Much depends here, obviously, on what is meant by 'the bondage of temporal things'; clearly the mature Augustine does not mean what Origen meant by such statements, as we shall see later.

Now Augustine is in good company here – whatever we make of Origen – for something of this sort is to be found in many leading theologians throughout the late patristic period and the Middle Ages. In the Renaissance it is taken up by Erasmus, for example, who in his attack on late mediaeval superstition repeats the point that ‘it was the flesh of Christ which stood in the way’ of an authentic spiritual faith among the apostles; that ‘the physical presence of Christ is of no profit for salvation’.²¹ Origen’s more contentious ideas may have been anathematized by the fifth ecumenical council, and his basic framework roundly condemned.²² But, in spiritual treatises especially, orthodox schemes of descending and ascending frequently give way to Origenist theses and assumptions, as others work the seams explored by his own *On Prayer*.

Maximus the Confessor (whose commitment to orthodoxy, like Augustine’s, cannot be doubted) may be allowed to represent the East, in words that might just as easily have been spoken by the Alexandrian:

For those who search according to the flesh after the meaning of God, the Lord does not ascend to the Father; but for those who seek him out in a spiritual way through lofty contemplations he does ascend to the Father. Let us, then, not always hold him here below though he came down here out of love to be with us. Rather, let us

21 *The Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, Fifth Rule (*The Erasmus Reader*, ed. E. Rummel, 146). Erasmus goes on to appeal to 2 Cor. 5:16, which he misreads in terms of a matter–spirit dualism. What he fails to see is that the superstition he is rightly criticizing is grounded not so much in an ignorance of the superiority of spirit, but in an ignorance of the way in which the physical humanity of Christ, as well as the spiritual, does indeed profit for salvation.

22 See *The Seven Ecumenical Councils (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 14), 316ff., especially Anathemas 9–11:

‘If anyone shall say that it was not the divine Logos made man . . . [who] descended into hell and ascended into heaven, but shall pretend that it is the *Nous* which has done this, that *Nous* of which they say (in an impious fashion) that he is Christ properly so-called, and that he is become so by the knowledge of the Monad: let him be anathema.

‘If anyone shall say that after the resurrection the body of the Lord was ethereal, taking the form of a sphere, and that such shall be the bodies of all after the resurrection; and that after the Lord himself shall have rejected his true body and after the others who rise shall have rejected theirs, the nature of their bodies shall be annihilated: let him be anathema.

‘If anyone shall say that the future judgment signifies the destruction of the body and that the end of the story will be an immaterial *physis* [nature], and that thereafter there will no longer be any matter, but only *nous* [mind], let him be anathema.’

go up to the Father along with him, leaving behind the earth and what is earthly . . .²³

Only beginners, says Maximus, cling to him who ‘had no form or beauty’, that is, to the earthly Jesus; we rightly follow Christ’s new trajectory ‘if we know him not in the limited condition of his descent in the incarnation but in the majestic splendour of his natural infinitude’. This prepares us for the further claim – the implications of which deserve some pondering in the light of subsequent developments – that it is no longer necessary ‘that those who seek the Lord should seek him outside themselves’.²⁴ If such remarks are anything to go by, the internalization and marginalization of which I have spoken proceeded apace in the Middle Ages, softening the edges of the church’s official commitment to the biblical story, or at least turning the thrust of its inquiries into the ascension in another direction: that of the ancient Hellenic quest for the *visio dei*.

In the West, of course, the doctrine of the ascension quickly got caught up in the eucharistic controversies, which themselves owed something to Augustine’s handling of the ascension. The difficulty here was not created by the undeniably awkward notion of Christ’s body rising up into the heavens, but by the necessity of bringing it down again at manifold times and places, not only for the sake of eucharistic realism but also, perhaps, as a sacramental counterweight to the subjectivist shift just described. Ironically it was in support of ‘Christ’s humble descent into the hands of the officiating priests’²⁵ that another Origenist idea, already evident in the East, gained considerable currency in the West as well. That the ascended Lord was ubiquitous or omnipresent Augustine himself had taught, but only in connection with his divine nature; in his human nature he was said to be absent.²⁶ But an increasingly self-conscious sacramentalism, which found it necessary to insist that in the eucharist the physical body of

23 *Gnostic Centuries* 2.47. We must pass over the mediating influence of Denys the Areopagite.

24 *Gnostic Centuries* 2.35; cf. 2.62: ‘Those who bury the Lord with honour will also behold him gloriously risen, while to all those who do not he is unseen. For he is no longer caught by those who lay snares, having no longer the external covering by which he seemed to allow himself to be caught by those who wanted him, and by which he endured the Passion for the salvation of all.’

25 Ray Petry, *A History of Christianity*, 277.

26 *On John’s Gospel* 50.13; cf. A. Heron, *Table and Tradition*, 72. See also, e.g., Question 47 in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Christ was present on the altar, obviously required some explanation. Aquinas provided what became the official answer, which sought to make sense of Jesus' physical presence without abandoning the belief that he had departed bodily into heaven. His answer was both ingenious and durable. The special pleading it involved at certain points, however, was not convincing to everyone, and the notion of the ubiquity of the incarnate Christ appealed to some as an alternative.²⁷ Of course this too involved special pleading, and it was recognized that a ubiquitous body was a strange sort of thing – even more difficult to reconcile with the adjective 'human' than a body said to have 'passed through the heavens'. Yet such objections were not necessarily regarded as decisive.

The intuition that deep christological and anthropological issues were at stake did as much to drive the eucharistic controversies as did the more explosive issues of church polity to which they were attached. Old questions were pressed: Where is the ascended Christ? Who and what is he? Is his humanity swallowed up in his divinity through the ascension or is it somehow preserved? What implications are there for our own humanity? If Rome did not fully resolve these questions, neither did the Reformation. Indeed, in its own concerted efforts to face them squarely, it came to grief on them. Luther claimed to have put Origen once again 'under the ban', for a defective understanding of God's grace. But Calvin and his followers saw in Luther's embrace of the ubiquity concept powerful Origenist tendencies²⁸ – tendencies that quite arguably helped to prepare the ground for a yet more radical turn toward 'ascension of the mind' in the modern period. To give a brief account of that turn is the next task; we will have occasion to return to the Reformation in a later chapter.

THE SIGHT THAT GREETED GALILEO when he first laid eyes (with the aid of that irreverent instrument, the telescope) on the lunar imperfections, which so plainly contradicted the notion that the heavens were a gateway to the divine, is sometimes taken as a convenient marker for the modern period. It might also be taken as the point

27 See *Summa Theologiae* 3.57f. and 3.75ff. on the substance–accidents distinction around which Aquinas builds his ingenious solution. We will take up this topic again in chapter five. Cf. also Farrow, 'Between the Rock and a Hard Place', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3.2, July 2001, 167ff.

28 See *Institute* 4.17; cf. Trigg, *Origen*, 256.

at which a reconsideration of the doctrine of the ascension became imperative. As it happened, however, it was not the progress of the Copernican revolution which brought about that reconsideration, but rather the programmatic rejection of the miraculous that prevailed among the *philosophes* during the Newtonian period, with its (now largely outmoded) mechanistic world view. This was a rejection which the new Kantian epistemology also helped to justify, and it was indeed Newton and Kant who created the conditions under which a major turning was taken regarding the doctrine in question.

When it came, it came in a rather shocking fashion. Early in the nineteenth century at the University of Berlin, for the first time in the long history of the church, an eminent Christian theologian was heard making the astonishing claim that Christ's resurrection, ascension and parousia 'cannot be laid down as properly constituent parts of the doctrine of his person'.²⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, who revised and restated the Christian faith for his own 'cultured' contemporaries with a finesse equal to that of the early Alexandrian, chose to do so in a way that neither required nor allowed the miraculous. What is more, in his struggle with the general conditions for theology imposed by Kant, he substituted Christian subjectivity (the church's shared intuition of God) for God's own being and acts as the proper object of dogmatic reflection.³⁰ Needless to say, all this had a profound effect on the entire dogmatic enterprise, but in particular it ruled out any kind of eschatological realism. Talk about the resurrection, ascension and parousia of Jesus could henceforth serve only to indicate something about the 'peculiar dignity' which he has in Christian eyes, and about the Christian's longing for unity with him in his own unsurpassed intuition or God-consciousness. Augustine's objective pole – perhaps even Origen's – was abandoned altogether.

Now it would not be wrong, for this and other reasons, to regard Schleiermacher's move as a decisive break with the past rather than a mere turning. But it is nonetheless true that it involves a genuine extension of the Origenist tradition as mediated by Augustine. For what emerges here is not so much a rejection of the doctrine of the ascension as the first really thoroughgoing attempt to interpret it in terms of *the effect Jesus has on us*, rather than in terms of events which

29 *The Christian Faith* §99; see also §157ff.

30 Cf. *Christian Faith* §3f., §15, §50, e.g., and the second of his *Speeches on Religion*.

belong to his own personal history.³¹ Let me try to explain the shape that took, by way of further reference to Kant.

Immanuel Kant, who had no more time for Jesus than did Saccas or Plotinus, identified the human race ‘in its complete moral perfection’ as the real Son of God, arguing that it is ‘our common duty as men to elevate ourselves to this ideal’ through the right exercise of reason.³² This was ascension of the mind viewed horizontally as well as vertically, corporately as well as individually; in short, the doctrine of progress which more or less defined the Enlightenment project. Schleiermacher did not reject that project, but sought to preserve for it a religious character. He too dislodged the doctrine of the ascension from christology, but made it over somewhat more narrowly into a doctrine about the church. Which is to say, he tipped it on its side in the manner already suggested by Kant and Lessing, while attempting to preserve its specifically Christian content. Through the church, he declared, the spirit of Jesus would make itself felt as ‘the ultimate world-shaping power’.³³

It was remarked at the time, and it bears repeating, that Protestantism *à la* Schleiermacher is somewhere considerably to the right of Rome. It is the *church* that now ‘appears before God’ in the high-priestly role that once belonged to Jesus.³⁴ In one sense, it might even be said that the ascension of Jesus is made to rely upon our ascension (that is, upon the success of the church) rather than

31 Just what to do with the resurrection accounts as such, Schleiermacher was uncertain; he even toyed with the swoon theory. As for the ascension, it had but meagre attestation, one highly doubtful view being piled upon another. Declining attention to the doctrine of the ascension – which Calvin, commenting on Acts 1, had referred to as ‘one of the chiefest points of our faith’ – can be traced back to this point, and to Schleiermacher’s decree that it ‘is not directly a doctrine of faith’ at all (§158.1). Cf. W. Walker, *The Ascension of Christ in Reformed Theology*.

32 *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* 2.1. Kant did allow to Jesus an epistemic value, for we can learn from him to identify this ideal as a *gift* to human reason rather than its product – as something that ‘has come down to us from heaven and has assumed our humanity’ – even if its actualization can only be the result of our collective self-elevation.

33 *Christian Faith* §169.3

34 Cf. *Christian Faith* §104.6. Schleiermacher recognized that Kant’s nod in the direction of Jesus was merely a polite dismissal. But in proclaiming Christ’s lordship afresh he himself was forced to limit that lordship to a posthumous influence over the inner life of his followers, who would in turn guide the world towards its proper destiny by pointing back to Jesus as the one who represents the perfect conjunction of the historical and the ideal. It is really the church, then, that sits in heavenly session.

our ascension on the ascension of Jesus. Schleiermacher's more renowned colleague in Berlin, G. W. F. Hegel, completed the theological inversion: since it is not as living but as dead that Jesus ascends into heaven, the church too must be prepared to die, having served its purpose of helping to open up humanity to the truth of its own intrinsically divine nature.³⁵ That is something we will pursue in a later chapter, when we take up again the question of the eucharist. At the moment what is of interest is the way in which both Schleiermacher and Hegel (not to mention their Enlightenment predecessors) are anticipated by Origen at certain key points.

First of all, in the Alexandrian's theology the history of Jesus is already conflated with that of the human race, introducing a doctrine of progress. Since his eschatology was circular or restorationist, operating on the principle that the end will be like the beginning, it required a horizontal as well as a vertical vector; only through the course of many aeons would the victory of the cross be won, and all restored to God.³⁶ Second, there as here the advance of mind or spirit is governed by a monist drive, so that it necessarily involves the sublation (to use Hegel's word) of the particular, the capitulation of 'all that is special' in favour of the universal. This is already implicit in the principle that the end will be like the beginning; arguably, it is the real reason why Origen long ago employed his 'sanctified perspicuity' to re-imagine the ascension of Jesus as an ascension of the mind only.³⁷ Third, and quite tellingly, Origen anticipates Schleiermacher and Hegel by letting go of Acts 1:11 along with Acts 1:9. Though Jesus himself provides the key that unlocks the door to the universal, there can be no question of a return of 'this same Jesus', for that obviously would mark a backward rather than a forward step. The ubiquitous one must remain ubiquitous; he must not compromise the advance of spirit through the re-presentation of his flesh. Such is the implication of Origen's eternal gospel, and the obvious corollary

35 See his *Philosophy of History*, 318ff.

36 See *First Principles* 1.6.2. For all these thinkers the original – and final – perfection of the world belongs to a timeless eternity. In Origen and Hegel it is quite clear that history, centred on the cross, is a self-cancelling affair.

37 For Schleiermacher, too, Christianity 'stands for the victory of the Infinite over finitude and sin', since 'its central interest lies in "the universal resistance of all things finite to the unity of the Whole, and the way in which the deity overcomes this resistance"' (H. R. MacKintosh, *Types of Modern Theology*, 56).

of any doctrine of ascension of the mind.³⁸ It has been freshly grasped in the modern era.

THE TURNING TAKEN BY SCHLEIERMACHER, I said, was something of a shock to the credal faith which he professed to interpret for a new age, and so it was, however natural and appropriate it may have seemed at the time. Perhaps the only way to account for it as a phenomenon of Christian theology, and a widely influential one at that, is to recall that it follows a long history of quietly marginalizing the human Jesus, which in my judgement is the chief characteristic of the Origenist option. But surely this is to level a strange charge at one who is widely regarded as the father of modern theology. Is not modern theology largely about a *recovery* of Jesus' humanity, which ever since the Arian crisis has been threatened by a too-fervent belief in his divinity?

Here is a little game which it is past time to expose! Modern theology in its Origenist mode has compromised all its attempts at such a recovery, however helpful some of them may be, for the simple reason that it has no room for the risen, ascended and coming one as a man; that is, as a particular human being. Eschatological docetism – looking only for the divine in Jesus by way of his effects on the church or on the race as a whole – is still docetism after all. Besides, loss of interest in Jesus' humanity did not and does not stem from belief in his unique divinity. It stems rather from setting up a false competition between his divine or 'superior' nature (as Origen used to call it) and his merely human or historical nature, a competition which one way or another will be resolved in favour of the former. That is something which a study of the history of the doctrine of the ascension makes plain; it is a further very basic way in which Origen anticipates his modern counterparts.

Now it is certainly the case that Schleiermacher himself resisted the starker forms of this competition and marginalization that are to be found among his contemporaries. Take, for example, Hegel's disciple, D. F. Strauss, author of the epoch-making *Life of Jesus*. Strauss took it as read that we must distinguish carefully between the ideal Christ and the historical Jesus, approaching the latter with caution while openly

38 In his outline of the apostolic teaching at the outset of *First Principles*, Origen quietly passes over the parousia. On his treatment of it elsewhere (e.g., in his commentary on Matthew) see Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 472f.

exalting the former.³⁹ What is more, he recognized with all candour that if the story of what happened to the rabbi from Nazareth is just a story, albeit a powerful one – if, to be more specific, bodily resurrection and ascension are events conjured up by the overwrought imagination of the disciples; if they are among those impossible things which, according to Origen’s hermeneutical theory, are included in scripture only to point us to a higher, mystical meaning – then the story itself and all the dogmatic convictions that go with it can and should be transferred away from that rabbi to man as such.

Mankind is the union of the two natures – god become man, the infinite manifesting itself in the finite, and the finite spirit remembering its infinitude; it is the child of the visible Mother and the invisible Father, Nature and Spirit. *Mankind* is the worker of miracles, in so far as in the course of human history the spirit more and more completely subjugates nature, both within and around man, until it lies before him as the inert matter on which he exercises his active power. *Mankind* is the sinless existence, for the course of its development is a blameless one; pollution cleaves to the individual only, and does not touch the race or its history. It is *Mankind* that dies, rises and ascends to heaven, for from the negation of its phenomenal life there ever proceeds a higher spiritual life, and through the abrogation of its finitude as personal, national and secular spirit it is exalted into unity with the Infinite Spirit of heaven.⁴⁰

Strauss, in other words, sided with the thoroughgoing secularism of Kant; ‘it is that carrying forward of the Religion of Christ to the Religion of Humanity to which all the noblest efforts of the present time are directed’, he insisted. But Schleiermacher, for all his obvious efforts to reserve a permanent place for Jesus in the hearts of the faithful, was peering over the same horizon.⁴¹

39 Strauss set out to restore ‘the image of the historical Jesus in its simply human features’, while referring us for salvation ‘to the ideal Christ’ – read ‘divine’ for ideal – that is, to that moral pattern which Jesus helped to reveal but which belongs in fact ‘to the general endowment of our kind’ (*The Life of Jesus for the People* §100).

40 *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* §151 (translation modified). The sexual – and sexist – conceptuality of this passage is unmistakable.

41 Since Kant we have returned to the task of seeking the divine in everyone. Schleiermacher accepted that quest, finding in Jesus one who is only quantitatively, not qualitatively, different from the rest of us.

The eclipse of Christ – that is, of Jesus of Nazareth – in Christian eschatology is by no means a recent phenomenon. But in its recent and more radical form lies the doubtful blueprint (note that it is the legacy of theology, not of biology) for the doctrine of the ascent of Man, that fully mythical figure who in spite of recent setbacks continues to stand in for the marginalized Jesus. Later on we will observe that the Religion of Humanity, like all myths of descending and ascending, is ultimately hollow and leads nowhere but to the triumph of forces that are destructive of human beings, even where it continues to disguise itself in Christian garb; indeed, that it is essentially gnostic, and that Origen's antidote to gnosticism has failed.⁴² Meanwhile, there is another task at hand, *viz.*, to explore the other main option for the interpretation of Jesus' ascension. For this we need to pay a second visit to the Chapel of the Ascension.

42 It should be remembered, however, as Mark Edwards reminds us in *Origen against Plato*, that Origen was trying both to combat gnosticism and to offer a version of Christianity that would encourage those trained in Platonism to go beyond Plato and discover Christ. It should also be recalled that – even if some of his ideas were later censured by the church, astutely and for good reason – Origen suffered for the faith and retains a place of honour in it.