

## **The ascension of Jesus - Jesus goes out of the way to Heaven thus saving Christians from many awkward questions!**

Jesus supposedly rose from the dead after being crucified. He appears to his disciples giving them no impressive or new doctrine and seems rather dull and only concerned about people agreeing that he rose from the dead.

The story of the ascension is plagiarised from the Book of Tobit chapter 12 where the angel Raphael rises to Heaven. The angel appears and "Tobit and Tobias were terrified and fell to the ground, trembling with fear. But Raphael said to them, 'Don't be afraid; everything is all right. Always remember to praise God. He wanted me to come and help you; I did not come on my own. So sing God's praises as long as you live. When you thought you saw me eating, I did not really eat anything; it only seemed so. While you are on this earth, you must praise the Lord God and give him thanks. Now I must go back to him who sent me. Write down everything that has happened to you.'" Then Raphael disappeared into the sky. Tobit and Tobias stood up, but they could no longer see him. They began to sing hymns of praise, giving thanks for all the mighty deeds God had done while his angel Raphael had been with them." Interestingly the angel says eating food can be an illusion - the gospel says Jesus ate so now we wonder if he actually did eat?

The appearances are claimed to have a moral and religious significance. But do they? No effort is made to give his friends the human touch - the accounts do not read like anything that is meant to teach and inspire and give joy. It is all about a clinical Jesus trying to win the argument: "Did he rise or not?"

Christians believe Jesus rose up not to a continuation of his bodily life on earth but to a new one with God where his eternal life had begun. Jesus talks to Mary Magdalene on the morning he rose as if he is ascending to God shortly. He tells her not to touch him for that reason. It is as if he rose from the dead yes but did not turn into a spiritual being yet. Those who say Jesus resurrected from the dead usually assume he resumed earthly life but a very different earthly life. But as Heaven is the presence of God it follows that Jesus being on earth does not mean he was having an earth life. And he didn't really live here - he just popped in until he ascended for the last time. The gospels never teach any of that heavenly stuff at all. Jesus came back to continue an earth life that is not resurrection in any sense that inspires us and gives us meaning. The role of the ascension would be to conveniently "explain" why he is not here now!

The resurrection stories read as if the ascension was the most important thing. Obviously there could be no ascension without a resurrection so was the resurrection just part of the story?

The author of Luke and Acts tells us the most about the ascension. But he has Jesus ascending on the day he rose in the gospel of Luke. This is forgotten in the book of Acts, the sequel where Jesus ascends to Heaven forty days later!! However we must be cautious. The bit reading that Jesus was taken up to Heaven in Luke 24.51 is absent from some quality ancient scripts. Sinaiticus and Cantabrigiensis and one Syriac version are the manuscripts that attest to it being an addition. That means we are left with the gospel just saying that Jesus went away. Luke did write Acts as a sequel but the gospel is meant to suffice by itself so the absence of the ascension is important.

Acts 1:9 says Jesus went up on a cloud so the cloud was the means of transport! In magical thinking there is no problem with that so we should stop reading the text as saying, "It's only a figure of speech". So the cloud took him away. This hints at him being some kind of apparition for even then people knew that solid men or women couldn't stand on clouds and knew that you can walk in a cloud that is too low - fog.

The ascension is about Jesus going back up to Heaven after the resurrection. Yet it makes little sense. If Jesus rose where was he when he wasn't appearing? He must have been in Heaven. The Church says he enjoyed the presence of God fully which is what Heaven is all about, since he rose. So even if he appeared on earth he was still in the Heavenly state. Religion says that Heaven is more a state of fulfilment not just a place. So what was the point of the ascension when Jesus was already in Heaven then? The dubious ascension - plus Jesus going up to Heaven as if Heaven is up above the clouds - makes the resurrection dubious too.

Christians argue that God gives us no binding new revelation since the death of the last apostle. Nobody else is infallible the way they were. It is hard not to think that the secondary purpose of the ascension theologically was to make it clear that the important revelations to the apostles were over which did not mean he couldn't pop back occasionally later on.

Assuming the ascension was the cut off point, then it gets interesting. Matthew and Mark have the ascension on the day of resurrection which fits Luke who in his book of Acts has the ascension after forty days only if the ascension did not mean a final disappearance. Some would understand this to be a contradiction and others would say there is no need to hold that in Matthew and Mark what was reported was the final vision. That is not the conclusion you get from the words Jesus used. He talks like it's a farewell and that he is comforting them for a future without his visible presence.

Jesus was seen going up to Heaven conveniently out of the way. This is like the golden plates of Joseph Smith that went back to Heaven. If somebody doesn't rise or if you have fake or non-existent golden plates then you have to say they have gone to Heaven to explain why they are not around any more. Jesus should have simply disappeared but he had to go up to the clouds and we know there is no Heaven up there. Why go up when there is no Heaven up there? Evidently the apostles and New Testament writers thought along with everybody else that Heaven was up in the clouds. Why should they have been any different? There is no evidence that they were using a popular idea that the sky was Heaven and not meaning it strictly and literally. Modern scholars have no right to say, "We know the sky is not Heaven so they did not mean it was Heaven literally or that Jesus went to live in the sky." That is just a cop-out.

Arguing that the Bible says the sky cannot contain God (1 Kings 8:27) and how clouds symbolise that God is present (Exodus 19:9, Daniel 7:13 and Mark 9:7) is not helpful. Not one of those texts says the clouds are not real or that they are a metaphor. And Jesus' clouds were real enough!

To say that Jesus just accommodated himself to the ignorance of the disciples about the true cosmology is open to a number of objections. There was the risk of misleading them. There was the risk of encouraging them to think Heaven was in the clouds. And if it was some god nobody believed in today people and scholars and theologians would be saying his ascension proved he was just a load of nonsense. There was no need for the accommodation. A simple dissolving into thin air would have been more appropriate or disappearing in a burst of light. The ascension of Jesus is an error. It happened to the risen Jesus. So it casts doubt on the resurrection. Dead men don't rise again to ascend to a heaven that is not heaven. It casts doubts on the witnesses to the resurrection visions.

Perhaps when the disciples saw Jesus ascend into Heaven in Acts he walked up a mountain and was hidden by fog and they assumed he was returning to Heaven. Absolutely no evidence bad or good is given for the ascension apart from an interpretation. When the resurrection is dubious the miracles of Jesus which are all of lesser importance are even more so. They were not reported by men who were reliable in religious matters for they wanted people to believe in the resurrection without evidence.

It is conveniently forgotten by the Church that though the resurrection of Christ has great importance in the New Testament it is not important by itself. It is important in that Jesus was found alive after his death TO GO UP TO HEAVEN! The resurrection was Jesus' salvation and the ascension its completion. However, we know that Jesus ascending into Heaven is nonsense for if he went up is he living in a cloud or did he go to the moon or to Mars? It is totally ridiculous to believe in the resurrection and to deny that Jesus is up in the clouds. If one is not true then why trust the other?