

II. Christianity

- Greek and Latin Patristics ■ Medieval Times and Reformation Era ■ Modern Europe and America
- American History of Modern Times

A. Greek and Latin Patristics

In the post-New Testament period, as in the New Testament itself, Christ's resurrection and his session at the right hand of God (on this, see Marksches) are often intimately linked, dispensing with the idea of a visible ascension (see e.g., *T. Adam* 3:8–11; Irenaeus, *Haer.* iii.16.9 referring to Rom 8:34; Irenaeus, *Haer.* iii.18.3). A (docetic?) notion of Christ's exaltation from the cross seems to have existed parallel to this (*Gos. Pet.* 19; *Acts John* 102; Irenaeus, *Haer.* v.31; on [dubious] reflections in art see Schiller: 142–44). Yet at the same time, belief in the bodily ascension is widely attested (see the NT additions Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; furthermore *Sib. Or.* 1:381; *T. Benj.* 9; from a gnostic perspective: Irenaeus, *Haer.* i.25.1 [*Carpocrates*; cf. also below]; Ebionites: Epiphanius, *Haer.* xxx.3.5). Ever since Justin, the ascension has formed part of the summaries of the incarnation (particularly *1 Apol.* 21.1; 31.7; 42.4; 46.5; 51.6–7; *Dial.* 34.2; 36.4–6; 38.1; 63.1; 85.1–2; 126.1; 132.1 and others; the *Kerygma Petri* as quoted by Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* vi.128.1; Ign. *Magn.* 11.3 [rec. long.]; *Legend of Abgar* as found in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* i.13.20; Hippolytus, *Fr. Ps.* 20; [Pseudo-]Athanasius, *Exp. Ps.* 23.7–8 [LXX; PG 27.141CD]; Gregory of Nyssa, *In asc. Christi* [GNO ix.326.16–327.4]), on other occasions, he is accompanied by Moses and Elijah (*Apoc. Pet.* [Ethiopian] 17), or by the cross (*Gos. Pet.* 10:39). Detailed descriptions of Christ's ascension can be found e.g., in *Pistis Sophia* 2–6 (see also *Ap. Jas.* pp. 14–16) as well as in the panegyric homilies of later periods (e.g., in Narsai, see below). In *Ascen. Isa.* 11:22–32 (cf. 3:18; 9:17–18), the ascension is described as a journey to the seventh heaven.

1. The Period between Resurrection and Ascension. The period can be seemingly quite short (e.g., in Mark 16:3; Luke 24:51; *Barn.* 15:9; *Gos. Pet.* 13[56]; Aristides, *Apol.* 2.8; *Ep. Apos.* 51[62]; Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 13.23; apparently on the same day; *Acts Pil.* 15:6; 16:6: two or three days after Easter) or can be extended beyond the 40 days of Acts 1:3 (adopted e.g., by Tertullian, *Apol.* 21.23; Pseudo-Cyprian, *De mont. Sina* 4), encompassing as much as 50 days (= Pentecost; see below) or even 18 months, i.e., 540/545/550 days: *Ascen. Isa.* 9:16 (Ethiopian); from a gnostic perspective: Irenaeus, *Haer.* i.3.2; i.30.14; *Ap. Jas.* p. 2:19–20, cf. 8:1–4; 12 years: *Pistis Sophia* 1–2). Accordingly, the dates given in at-

tempts to historicize the ascension vary as well (see also *Pistis Sophia* 2).

2. Place. The New Testament mentions a variety of places in which the ascension is assumed to have taken place (see above). In Jerusalem, the summit of the Mount of Olives was later commemorated as the place of the ascension (see below); on the other hand, some sources postulate Galilee, as in *Acta Pil.* 16:6; Tertullian, *Apol.* 21.23; Soph. Jes. Chr. (NHC III,4).

3. Details of the Ascension Event. Throughout the 2nd and the early part of the 3rd centuries, terminology regarding the ascension was very much in a state of flux. It could be interpreted as Christ "ascending," but also as God "assuming" him (A. Harnack provides an overview of terminology in: Hahn/Hahn: 382–84). Already in the 2nd century (e.g., [Pseudo-]Justin, *Res.* 9.4; Irenaeus, *Epid.* 41; 84; *Haer.* iii.16.8; v.31), but also in later periods (Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* 24.3–4; *Res.* 51; *Prax.* 30; Novatian, *Trin.* 13.5; Victorinus of Pettau, *Apoc.* 4.1; Origen, *Fr. Ps.* 16 [LXX 15].9–10 [PG 12,1216]; Augustine, *Serm.* 263A.3; 264.4; 265D1–3 [anti-Manichaean]; *Fid. symb.* 13; cf. *Civ.* xxii.4) apologetic intentions manifest themselves in the special emphasis placed on the bodily resurrection (rejected among others by Apelles and Hermogenes; Bauer: 242, 261, 276).

The ascension is often assumed to have taken place, in accordance with Acts 1:9, in a cloud. At times, Christ is surrounded by a retinue of angels and the just (Mark 16:4 k; *Ascen. Isa.* 9:17 [Ethiopian]; *Ep. Apos.* 51[62]; *Legend of Abgar* as found in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* i.13.20; Hippolytus, *Fr. Ps.* 20; [Pseudo-]Athanasius, *Exp. Ps.* 23.7–8 [LXX; PG 27.141CD]; Gregory of Nyssa, *In asc. Christi* [GNO ix.326.16–327.4]), on other occasions, he is accompanied by Moses and Elijah (*Apoc. Pet.* [Ethiopian] 17), or by the cross (*Gos. Pet.* 10:39). Detailed descriptions of Christ's ascension can be found e.g., in *Pistis Sophia* 2–6 (see also *Ap. Jas.* pp. 14–16) as well as in the panegyric homilies of later periods (e.g., in Narsai, see below). In *Ascen. Isa.* 11:22–32 (cf. 3:18; 9:17–18), the ascension is described as a journey to the seventh heaven.

Because of its close linkage with the resurrection and exaltation traditions (see Lohfink: 99–109), the ascension as such was not able to develop an appreciable kerygmatic or liturgical momentum of its own in the first three centuries.

4. Feast of the Ascension (Liturgy). Initially, Ascension and Pentecost were celebrated jointly on the 50th day after Easter (specific instances documented in Cabié: 126–62; see also Colpe et al.: 455–56). Clear evidence of an independent celebration of the Feast of Ascension on the 40th day after Easter (on this, see below and Cabié: 185–97) cannot be found until the last third of the 4th century for Antioch (375/400: *Apos. Con.* v.20.2; viii.33.4;

386/98: John Chrysostom [CPG 4342]) and perhaps for Cappadocia (ca. 388: Gregory of Nyssa [CPG 3178]; cf., however, Gessel: a sermon for the Easter vigil). In Constantinople, the feast was celebrated in the church of the suburb of Elaia already by 425 (Socrates Scholasticus, *Hist. eccl.* vii.26). An Ascension Feast is also documented for Jerusalem prior to 439 (*Lect. Hieros. arm.* 57 Renoux). The celebration included the reading of Scripture (Acts 1:1–14; Luke 24:41–53) and was accompanied by singing: Ps 47:6 and Ps 24 (see below and Cabié: 172–76 for later developments in Jerusalem). For Eastern Syria see Kretschmar: 229–31 and Cabié: 156–58. For the West, evidence surfaces from the 380s onwards for northern Italy (Chromatius of Aquileia, see below; Filastrius of Brescia, *Haer.* 140, cf. 149) and North Africa (Augustine, beginning in 396/397, see below; also *Ep.* 54.1). In Rome the celebration is attested for the first time in the sermons of Leo the Great (444–45, see below) and in the so-called *Sacramentarium Leonianum* of the 5th–6th centuries (see Alberich; Weinert; Colpe et al.: 456–57). The reasons for the adoption of a separate Feast of Ascension are not clear (Augustine implies in *Ep.* 54.1 that the cycle of feasts extending from Good Friday to Pentecost was introduced by way of council decrees; nothing is known apart from this); yet the tendency toward a historical-commemorative arrangement of the liturgical year can also be observed elsewhere in the 4th century (Christmas, Passion/Easter cycle).

5. Ascension Preaching. During the pre-Constantinian period, the Ascension, if at all, only acquires greater theological importance in the writings of Irenaeus (e.g., *Epid.* 83–85; an overview can be found in Colpe et al.: 448–51). Biblical references from the Old Testament find use as liturgical texts, particularly Ps 24, as well as Pss 19:7; 57:12; 68:18–19 and 110:1. Since it took a long time for an ecclesiastical feast of the Ascension to develop, festive sermons devoted to the theme “In ascensionem domini/Christi” did not appear in the early church until relatively late. Among these are, in the West, the homilies of Chromatius of Aquileia (*Serm.* 8), the Gothic bishop Maximinus (*Serm.* 4–6), Augustine (*Serm.* 261–265, 263A, 265A–F), Leo the Great (*Serm.* 73–74), Pseudo-Eusebius of Emesa (CPL 966, *Serm.* 27; cf. PL 39.2081–82), as well as the pseudo-Augustinian sermons found in PL 39.2082–2087 (further information in Cabié: 192–97). In the East there is a greater wealth of transmitted records: for Greek-speaking regions see CPG V, 150–51; for Syria e.g., Ephraem, *Hymni dispersi* 18 (Lamy iv.745–749; for Isaac of Antiochia, Narsai, Jakob von Sarug see Brock, nr. 81, 121, 178 und Mathews, nr. 51).

Most preachers seemed less interested in historicizing the Ascension than in interpreting it soteriologically. Emphasis was thus placed not on

Christ’s departure from this world, but on the resurrected Christ’s exaltation to God and on his session at the Father’s right hand, with the importance of this event being underscored for the individual believer as well as for the cosmos (often by including the entire history of the incarnation). For this purpose, preachers readily invoked the imagery provided by the Old Testament passages mentioned above. At times, the 40 days between Easter and Ascension were interpreted in a typological-allegorical way, while Acts 1:9–11, the *locus classicus* for Ascension in New Testament, played a relatively unimportant role.

6. Early Christian Architecture and Art. Already in pre-Constantinian times observance of the Ascension Feast in Jerusalem was associated with the Mount of Olives. Initially centering on a grotto (known under the name of Eleona; already mentioned in *Acts John* 97), later celebrations were conducted elsewhere (Imbomon). Constantine and his mother erected the Eleona church and perhaps an additional chapel there (Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* iii.41–43, which is difficult to interpret; *Itin. Eger.* 25.11; 35.4 and further references; *Itin. Burdig.*, p. 595.4–6 Wesseling). The Imbomon church, furnished with a large cross, was founded by Poemenia (Pomonia), a wealthy Roman matron (see PLRE ii.894–95).

Unmistakable depictions of the Ascension are hard to find in early Christian art (see Schrade; Gutberlet; Wessel; Schiller: III.141–51; Colpe et al. 460–64). Whether the Recklinghausen limestone relief (2nd half of the 4th cent.) portrays the Ascension is a matter of dispute (Schiller: III.143 with illustration 447). In the East it is difficult to distinguish depictions of the Ascension from those of the Theophany (e.g., in Jerusalem pilgrim ampullae in Monza [Schiller: I, illus. 55; III, illus. 460], the Silver Plate of Perm [Schiller: II, illus. 322], a Palestinian wooden chest [Schiller: II, illus. 9], the Coptic fresco at Bawit [Schiller: III, illus. 462] and the Rabula Codex [Schiller: III, illus. 459]); in this case, we can assume influence from the decoration of the Eleona church or of the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem. In the West, the ascending Christ places his hand in the hand of God the Father (e.g., the so-called Reider tablet in Munich from ca. 400, Schiller: III, illus. 12, 451; the Servanne sarcophagus in Arles from the end of the 4th century; Tsuji, illus. 2; marble caskets from Ravenna; Tsuji, illus. 4), or he is pulled or carried upward by angels (wooden door of S. Sabina in Rome, 432; Schiller: III, illus. 457).

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