

So what of ‘the ascension’?

The ascension of Jesus is described in Acts 1, but I suspect that a lot of our sense of the event could come from artwork and not from the text. What happened in the ascension? Was it that Jesus went upwards until a cloud made it no longer possible to see the departing figure, or was it that a cloud of the presence of God, a cloud of glory hid Jesus from their sight? Given the promise of Matthew 28:20, I think the latter is more likely. Otherwise we may be forced to ask questions about how far Jesus went ‘up’ and so on.

If the cloud was indeed the cloud of the glory of God, what are the implications? The first would be that the ascension refers to exaltation and not elevation, which is what Luke continues to say in Acts 2:33 (cf. Heb. 1:3). But it is the exaltation of Jesus the Man. We may see Matthew 28:18-20 bearing this out. ‘All authority in heaven and on earth’ is ‘given’ to Jesus, just as it had been given to Adam. As the Gospel of Matthew commences with the search for ‘the king of the Jews’ it ends with the declaration that this Man is king of the whole of creation. That is, too, the point of Hebrews 2:5-10.

The command to make the nations his disciples is consistent with this. All the nations were ‘in Adam’ (Acts 17:26); it was God’s intention that from Adam would come a world of nations fulfilled in worship, so that the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God’ (Hab. 2:14; cf. Num. 14:21; Isa. 11:9). The promise of Psalm 2:8-9, made to the anointed (messiah) son/king, is in the flow of this. Matthew 28:18-20 is a declaration of triumph: Adam as last is reigning and fulfilling the creational mandate.

And Hebrews 2 indicates that his reign over all things, by means of his tasting death, is for everyone, in order that he might bring many sons to glory. God has made him head over all things *for* the church (Eph. 1:22). The church is the body by which he fills all in all. The church is his bride, the multi-ethnic bride, described in Revelation 21.

In Christ, the glorified and exalted Man, we are glorified. Not only is he glorified, but his glorified humanity is with him seated in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6). His reign as Man is our reign, because we reign in him. Hence Romans 8:28-30:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

There is a glory yet to be revealed in and to us, but we have been glorified. Our hope is not of what is yet to be accomplished but of the revelation of what already is. Hence we wait, not so much for the return of Christ, as if he were absent (contrast Matt. 28:20), but for his ‘appearing’. We wait for the cloud of glory to be opened to our sight and for us to ‘be revealed with him in glory’ (Col. 3:4).

The ascension of Christ to the throne, where he now reigns is no minor part of the story; it is the declaration that Christ has triumphed, but it is more than that alone. It is the declaration, to principalities and powers, that God in his wisdom has effected his purpose for the whole creation in Christ our conquering King.

