
The Ascension is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, and as such continues to be studied by biblical scholars. And although it figures prominently in a variety of theologians, Augustine, Calvin and Barth included, it is only in the last century or so that specific doctrinal studies have appeared, such as William Milligan (1892) and H.B. Swete (1910), culminating in J.G. Davies’ 1958 Bampton Lectures, *He Ascended into Heaven* (reprinted by James Clarke in 2004), an example of historical theology at its best. More recently, Douglas Farrow’s *Ascension and Ecclesia* (1999), originally a London PhD dissertation, offers a strong systematic case for linking our understanding of the ascended Christ with the life and being of the Church, drawing particularly on Irenaeus and Origen, as well as Augustine.

The different ‘angles’ provided by these works suggests that, with the Ascension, we are in danger of falling victim to that common malaise of current theology, and other overall disciplines, namely the fragmentation of knowledge. How can we attempt to hold these disparate studies together? In many respects, Matthew Sleeman’s book (another London PhD in origin) is both a symptom of this tendency and a potential antidote to it. Sleeman, who teaches New Testament at Oak Hill Theological College, brings to his task the unusual training of a geographer, which makes for a demanding but very thought-provoking book, whose conclusions deserve to be taken seriously beyond the confines of technical biblical scholarship, within which it could otherwise become relegated.

Before we look in more detail at Sleeman’s main contentions, it is perhaps worth emphasising that he is primarily concerned with the Ascension as narrated in Acts. In other words, this is not the Pauline descent-ascent theology (Phil. 2:5ff.), nor the exaltation into glory theology (Eph. 4:9ff.), nor the Johannine resurrection-ascension synthesis, as when Jesus addresses Mary Magdalene (John 20:17). Only the Acts narrative (Acts 1:1-11), the longest of all, mentions the forty days, and such geographical features as the Mount of Olives, and the terrain of the future Christian mission, Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, in the context of disciples described as ‘men of Galilee’ – to say nothing of the coming gift of the Holy Spirit. Theologies of the Ascension tend to build on a combination of these and other New Testament texts. This is not what we have here.
Sleeman’s purpose is threefold: to place the Ascension in effect in the driving seat of the whole of Acts; to interpret it in terms of narrative criticism, through a synchronic rather than a diachronic approach; and to blend into his treatment a heavy dose of geographical theory. The first has been hotly debated in New Testament scholarship, as witness the oft-quoted view of Moule of an ‘absentee Christology’, which he later moderated. The second is part of the move to complement text-source criticism by seeing the texts and their possible sources as part of wider narratives. But it is the third ingredient that provides the glue that draws Sleeman’s thesis together, and it is the one which also has ecclesiological implications.

So what is ‘geographical theory’? Sleeman begins explaining this by pointing out that for many people, geography is about how the map of the world is coloured, which is inherently static, with each map historically conditioned by the time in which it was prepared. Geographical theory, by contrast, sets out to loosen these limitations, concentrating on the different perceptions people have of the notion of ‘space’, as well as the impact they make on the ‘space’ they occupy, and the world they inhabit. A particular hermeneutical tool is the work of Edward Soja, a social geographer, whose work, Sleeman points out, has even been adopted in accountancy. For him, geographical perception works on three levels: what he calls ‘firstspace’, which is about the experience of the empirical, what is ‘actually there’; ‘secondspace’, which is about perception, the theoretical; and what he calls ‘thirdspace’, which is about the imaginative, the creative. It is not hard to see how, on the basis of this view, the Ascension in Acts starts by being Jesus’ ‘firstspace’, where he is the Ascended One; then moves into being the ‘secondspace’ of the disciples, their perception of a reality they do not fully understand; and from there becomes a ‘thirdspace’, where their following of Christ must lead them on this earth – and Sleeman keeps emphasising that for Luke the Ascension is not about heavenly glorification, but about directing the earthly mission of the fledgling Christian community. For him, the ‘presence’/‘absence’ of Christ dichotomy does not ultimately work. And the prime example of that is how the ascended Jesus is interpreted by Sleeman as ‘directing’ the choice of Matthias to replace Judas, before the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost – after which there are no further apostolic replacements, not even when James the brother of John is executed (Acts 12:2).

It is not necessary to buy into all these distinctions and points of exegesis to see where they can lead. For a start, Sleeman contends that if Luke is to be regarded as the first historian of the Church, then he ought also to be called its first geographer. Time and again, not just in his treatment of the