

Chapter 2

Assumptus est in caelum

Rapture and Heavenly Exaltation in Early Judaism and Luke-Acts

1. Introduction

The Lukan ascension story (Lk 24:50–53; Acts 1:1–11)¹ makes us acutely aware of what G.E. Lessing called “der garstige breite Graben”² that separates the world of the Bible from our modern (post-Enlightenment) society. Modern readers are struck if not embarrassed by the naive cosmology that seems to underlie Luke’s story presentation. As if one could gain access to the heavenly realm and become immortal by simply mounting a cloud! The study of comparative religion has uncovered an uneasy number of competitive ascension stories (*infra*), stories which have not infrequently been a source of embarrassment from the very beginnings of Christianity. Early Christian apologetic could very often do no better than ascribing such myths to demonic imitations or, when they antedated the life of Christ, to diabolic prefigurements of Christ’s real ascension.³ A number of historical,

¹ Originally published in: A.W. Zwiep, “Assumptus est in caelum. Rapture and Heavenly Exaltation in Early Judaism and Luke-Acts”, in: F. Avemarie, H. Lichtenberger (eds.), *Auferstehung – Resurrection. The Fourth Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium. Resurrection, Transfiguration and Exaltation in Old Testament, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity (Tübingen, September 1999)* (WUNT 135; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 323–349. A *Forschungsbericht* of ascension scholarship since D.F. Strauss up to 1996 and a bibliography of books and articles on the ascension in Luke-Acts published between 1900–1996 are found in A.W. Zwiep, *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology* (NT.S 87; Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997) 1–35, 200–215. To this should now be added: M. Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* (MSSNTS 146; Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 3–21; see the postscript to this chapter.

² The expression is found in G.E. Lessing, “Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft” (1777), in: *Lessings Werke* 6 (ed. Th. Matthias; Leipzig: M. Hesse, o.J.) 140.

³ So e.g. Justin, *Apologia* 1.21.1, 6; *PG* 6:360–361; ed. M. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris Apologiae pro Christianis* (PTS 38; Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1994) 63–64: Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ... ἀναστάντα ἀνεληλυθέναι εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, οὐ παρὰ τοὺς παρ’ ὑμῖν λεγομένους υἱοὺς τῷ Διὶ <γενομένου> καινόν τι φέρομεν (...) (then referring to Hermes, Asclepius, Dionysus, Heracles, the *Dioscuri*, Persea, Bellerophon, Ariadne, the Roman emperors and concluding:) Ἄλλ’, ὡς προέφημεν, οἱ φαῦλοι δαίμονες ταῦτα ἔπραξαν. See also *Apologia* 1.54.1–10; *PG* 6:409; ed. Marcovich, *Apologiae* 108–109; *Dial* 69.1–7; *PG* 6:636–637; ed. M. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone* (PTS 47; Berlin, New

literary and theological issues complicate a more constructive appraisal of the Lukan ascension story. In marked distinction from Paul and the traditionally alleged eye-witnesses (Matthew and John), Luke is the only canonical writer to [324] provide his readers with a detailed description of a visible ascension forty days after the resurrection in the presence of apostolic eye-witnesses.⁴ Further, the chronology of Luke 24 and Acts 1 is not easily synchronised. The end of the Gospel seems to date the ascension on Easter Sunday, whereas Acts 1 has it all forty days later (Acts 1:3). Early scribes have been aware of this discrepancy and have taken some incisive measures.⁵ The notion of the forty days, furthermore, appears to be a late datum in church history, its next attestation after Luke being found only as late as Tertullian.⁶ If in subsequent centuries the forty days are mentioned, canonical forces are at work.⁷ From early times on there are competitive ascension dates, especially in Gnostic circles,⁸ although a brief glance into the writ-

York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997) 189–191; Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 21.23; *PL* 1:402; *CChr. SL* 1:27: “circumfusa nube in caelum est ereptus [v.l. receptus] multo verius quam apud vos asseverare de Romulis Proculi solent”.

⁴ This is the classic objection of H.S. Reimarus and D.F. Strauss, see H.S. Reimarus, *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (ed. G. Alexander; GS 5; Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1972) 2:244–246, 431–433: “Allein, warum seine *Himmelfahrt* von den zweyen vornehmsten Evangelisten, Matthaeo und Johanne, die Augenzuegen seiner Begebenheiten und Thaten waren, gänzlich übergangen werde, das hab ich nimmer begreifen können. Wie war es möglich, daß sie bey seinen letzten Reden nach der Auferstehung zugegen gewesen wären, und doch von der glorwürdigsten Scene seiner Auffahrt gen Himmel nicht ein Wort erwehnten? ... Woher wusten denn die beiden andern Evangelisten ein mehres, die doch alles aus Hörsagen hatten?” (431, his italics); D.F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1835, 41840) 2:655–658.

⁵ I have discussed the textual status of the ascension narratives in A.W. Zwiep, “The Text of the Ascension Narratives (Luke 24.50–3; Acts 1.1–2,9–11)”, *NTS* 42 (1996) 219–244, defending the authenticity of the words καὶ ἀνεφέρετο εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν (Lk 24:51) and προσκυνήσαντες αὐτόν (Lk 24:52) (now Chapter 1 of the present work). This article includes *inter alia* a critique on the tendency hypothesis of M.C. Parsons, “A Christological Tendency in Ψ^{75} ”, *JBL* 105 (1986) 463–479; idem, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts. The Ascension Narratives in Context* (JSNT.S 21; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 29–52.

⁶ Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 21.23; *PL* 1:402; *CChr. SL* 1:126: “Cum discipulis autem quibusdam apud Galilaeam Iudaeae regionis ad quinquaginta [v.l. quadraginta] dies egit, docens eos quae docerent”.

⁷ Up till the fifth century the Feast of the Ascension was celebrated either on the day of Pentecost or on Easter Sunday. There is no clear evidence in the early centuries of an Ascension Feast on the fortieth day. See G. Kretschmar, “Himmelfahrt und Pfingsten”, *ZKG* 66 (1954/55) 209–254; J. van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959, 21961) 195–205, 251–260; H.-C. Schmidt-Lauber, “Himmelfahrtsfest”, *TRE* 15 (1986) 341–344.

⁸ Many sources place the ascension on the resurrection day itself. According to Irenaeus Gnostic groups like the Valentinians and the Ophites taught that the ascension of Jesus had taken place 18 months after the resurrection (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.3.2; *SC* 264:52; *Adversus haereses* 1.30.14; *SC* 264:382–384). According to *Ascensio Isaiae* the ascension took place after 545 days (*AscenIs* 9:16). The Gnostic treatise *Pistis Sophia* has Jesus depart

ings of church fathers of a more orthodox persuasion reveals that alternative ascension dates were not the prerogative of sectarian groups only.⁹

Perhaps the most severe criticism levelled against Luke, however, concerns his alleged *theological* treatment of the ascension theme. Lukan scholarship has often dismissed Luke's ascension story as an ill-informed attempt to visualise what in early Christian belief had in fact happened forty days earlier, Christ's (invisible) heavenly exaltation on "the first Easter morning". Contrary to the early Christian belief that the risen Jesus was exalted to heaven as an immediate sequel to the resurrection (so that the post-Easter [325] manifestations of Jesus were "appearances from heaven"), Luke is said to have *postponed* Jesus' departure to heaven and his subsequent enthronement for forty days, thus having Jesus dwell around among his followers in a quasi-earthbound condition, risen but not yet exalted.¹⁰

Although this is the position of a significant strand of biblical scholarship,¹¹ I am not altogether convinced that this line of interpretation sufficiently allows Luke to speak for himself. Although Luke is surely not a theologian of the stature of, say, the Fourth Evangelist or Paul, he nevertheless is entitled to his own views and convictions and deserves to be treated as such (as a coherent thinker, I mean), unless compelling evidence suggests otherwise.

In my *Ascension of the Messiah* I have offered an alternative assessment of Luke's understanding of the resurrection-exaltation-ascension complex, largely based on the form-critical classification of the ascension story as a "rapture story" (*Entrückungserzählung*) in the perception of a late first-century Christian ("Luke") standing in the biblical (monotheistic) tradition. In what follows I will briefly summarise the major lines of the argument and refine (now that space permits) some of the critical issues involved. What is the significance of the ascension? Is it appropriate to speak of the ascension event in terms of an exaltation (what is traditionally called Christ's *sessio ad dexteram Dei*)? If it turns out, as I will argue in this article, that in line with the early Christian resurrection kerygma Luke regards the Easter event as *terminus a quo* of the exaltation,¹² rather than the ascension "on the

from earth even 11 years after the resurrection (Pistis Sophia 1). See further Chapter 8 of the present work.

⁹ Concise surveys of alternative ascension terms are found in: W. Bauer, *Das Leben Jesu im Zeitalter der neutestamentlichen Apokryphen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1909; repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965) 275–279, and U. Holzmeister, "Der Tag der Himmelfahrt des Herrn", *ZKTh* 55 (1931) 44–82.

¹⁰ See G. Lohfink, *Die Himmelfahrt Jesu. Untersuchungen zu den Himmelfahrts- und Erhöhungstexten bei Lukas* (StANT 26; Munich: Kösel, 1971) 274–275.

¹¹ Recently e.g. M. Karrer, *Jesus Christus im Neuen Testament* (NTD Ergänzungsreihe 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 58.

¹² Since my concern is with *Luke's* perception of the matter, it is not necessary to discuss the thesis of J.A.T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming. The Emergence of a Doctrine* (London: SCM, 1957) 140–159; idem, "The Most Primitive Christology of All?" (1956);

fortieth day”,¹³ what, then, is the significance of the ascension, if it is not a dramatic and visible act of enthronement?

Before a conclusive answer to these questions can be given, one needs to be clear on the “pre-givens” and the definitions that are being used. I will therefore, first, briefly summarise what in my view are the broad parameters of early Christian preaching on the Easter events as Luke would have heard it on a regular Sunday morning in his local church. Second, I will discuss some of [326] the definitions most pertinent to the debate, in particular “ascension”, “rapture” and “exaltation”, because much hinges on a proper use of the terms. By then we can turn to Luke-Acts to find out where Luke stands and draw the necessary conclusions.

2. The Early Christian Resurrection and Exaltation Kerygma

According to a broad consensus of biblical scholarship, the proclamation of the *resurrection* of Jesus belongs to the core of the early Christian kerygma (e.g. 1 Cor 15; Acts 2:14–36). The author of Acts, though writing from a chronological distance, repeatedly and emphatically reports that the resurrection of Jesus was the most fundamental affirmation of the early apostolic preaching.¹⁴ “Am Anfang der Verkündigung der Urgemeinde”, says Hans Conzelmann, “stand die Aussage, daß Gott den gekreuzigten Jesus nicht im Tode gelassen, sondern von den Toten auferweckt hat”.¹⁵ Reginald H. Fuller has argued in similar vein: “The resurrection of Jesus from the dead was

repr. in: idem, *Twelve New Testament Studies* (SBT 34; London: SCM, 1962) 139–153; F. Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel. Ihre Geschichte im frühen Christentum* (FRLANT 83; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963; UTB.W 1873, ⁵1995) 184–186, et al., that Jesus would be exalted only at the parousia. For Luke, Jesus is the *already* exalted Lord.

¹³ Although Luke does not date the ascension exactly “on the fortieth day” (he only says that Jesus made his appearances δι’ ἡμερῶν τεσσαράκοντα “during a period of forty days”), this is usually taken as implied by the narrative. But cf. John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Acta apostolorum* 1.3: Οὐκ εἶπε, Τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας, ἀλλὰ, Δι’ ἡμερῶν τεσσαράκοντα. Ἐφίστατε γὰρ, καὶ ἀφίπτατο πάλιν (PG 60:18; NPNF 11:5). According to Chrysostom’s calculations, the ascension took place on a sabbath (Δοκεῖ δέ μοι καὶ ἐν σαββάτῳ γεγονέναι ταῦτα. Οὐ γὰρ ἂν οὕτω καὶ τὸ διάστημα ἐδήλωσεν εἰπὼν, Ἀπὸ ὄρους τοῦ καλουμένου Ἐλαιῶνος, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐγγὺς Ἱερουσαλήμ, σαββάτου ἔχον ὁδὸν, εἰ μὴ ὠρισμένον τι μῆκος ὁδοιπορίας ἐβάδιζον ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοῦ σαββάτου, 3.1; PG 60:33; NPNF 11:17), and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost “eight or nine days later” (Διὰ τοῦτο οὐδὲ εὐθέως ἀνελθόντος αὐτοῦ παραγίνεται, ἀλλὰ μετὰ ὀκτῶ ἢ ἐννέα ἡμέρας, 3.1; PG 60:20; NPNF 11:6).

¹⁴ Acts 4:2, 33; 17:3, 18, 32; 23:6–8; 25:19; 26:23. Cf. John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Acta apostolorum* 1.3: Καὶ γὰρ τοῦτο μάλιστα ἐστὶ τουτὶ τὸ βιβλίον, ἀπόδειξις ἀναστάσεως (PG 60:16; NPNF 11:3).

¹⁵ H. Conzelmann, *Grundriß der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (bearbeitet v. A. Lindemann; UTB.W 1446; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1967, ⁵1993) 46.

the central claim of the church's proclamation. There was no period when this was not so".¹⁶ More recently, Martin Karrer wrote: "Die christliche Überlieferung [= von der Auferstehung Jesu] beginnt sehr früh. An ihrem Anfang steht die laut Paulus rettende *Glaubensaussage*: "Gott erweckte ihn (Jesus, den Herrn) aus Toten" (Röm 10,9)".¹⁷ According to Karrer we find here "ein *Paradigma theologischer Gemeinsamkeit der urchristlichen Gemeindekreise*".¹⁸ Similarly, Peter Stuhlmacher has recently described "das urchristliche Auferweckungsbekenntnis" as "ein ganz entscheidende[s] Zentraldatum der Biblischen Theologie des Neuen Testaments".¹⁹

In its attempt to articulate the *meaning* of the resurrection for Christ the early church made intensive use of the Old Testament scriptures.²⁰ Especially Psalm 110, understood messianically, played a significant role in early Christianity as "proof-from-scripture" for the resurrection/exaltation of Jesus: "The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'" (Ps 110:1 NRSV).²¹ Accordingly, among the various other (!) interpretative models the resurrection event has been understood as an act of enthronement, the moment in which Christ (the Κύριος μου of Psalm 110:1) ascended his heavenly throne. In the tradition taken

¹⁶ R.H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (New York: Macmillan, 1971; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 48.

¹⁷ Karrer, *Jesus Christus* 24 (his italics).

¹⁸ Karrer, *Jesus Christus* 25 (his italics).

¹⁹ P. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments I. Grundlegung. Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, 1997) 162–179 (quotation from 175, italicised by Stuhlmacher).

²⁰ Note that I take here position with Ph. Vielhauer, "Ein Weg zur neutestamentlichen Christologie? Prüfung der Thesen Ferdinand Hahns", in: idem, *Aufsätze zum Neuen Testament* (TB 31; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1965) 167–175, by taking Christ's exaltation as the occasion for the use of Ps 110, rather than that Ps 110 occasioned belief in Christ's exaltation, as e.g. Hahn, *Hoheitstitel* 126–132, would have it.

²¹ On Ps 110 in the NT, see D.M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand. Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (SBL.MS 18; Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1973); J. Dupont, "Assis à la droite de Dieu. L'interprétation du Ps 110,1 dans le Nouveau Testament" (1974), in: idem, *Nouvelles Études sur les Actes des Apôtres* (LeDiv 118; Paris: Cerf, 1984) 210–295; M. Gourgues, *A la droite de Dieu. Résurrection de Jésus et actualisation du psaume 110:1 dans le Nouveau Testament* (EtB; Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, J. Gabalda, 1978); M. Hengel, "Psalm 110 und die Erhöhung des Auferstandenen zur Rechten Gottes", in: C. Breytenbach, H. Paulsen, C. Gerber (eds.), *Anfänge der Christologie. FS F. Hahn zum 65. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 43–73; M. Hengel, "'Setze dich zu meiner Rechten!'. Die Inthronisation Christi zur Rechten Gottes und Psalm 110,1", in: M. Philonenko (ed.), *Le Trône de Dieu* (WUNT 69; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993) 108–194; transl. in M. Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 119–225; K. Berger, *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums. Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (UTB.WG; Tübingen, Basel: A. Francke, 1994, 1995) 20–22. For its use in the early church see C. Marksches, "Sessio ad dexteram. Bemerkungen zu einem altchristlichen Bekenntnismotiv in der christologischen Diskussion der altchristlichen Theologen", in: Philonenko, *Trône* 252–317.

up by Paul in the opening verses of Romans it is said that the Son (Jesus) “was declared to be Son of God in power ἐξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν” (Rom 1:4), that is, “since (or by virtue of) his resurrection from the dead”.²² In this text the resurrection event marks the christological point of transition. Similarly, in Acts 13:33–34 Christ’s Sonship is associated with his resurrection: here resurrection and exaltation are so closely related that what is strictly speaking an exaltation or enthronement text (Ps 2:7) is adduced as proof for the resurrection. In Acts 2:36 Luke makes Peter say that “God has made (ἐποίησεν) Him both Christ and Lord” in a resurrection context.²³ In the early strata of christological reflection, then, resurrection and exaltation (*sessio ad dexteram Dei*) are closely bound up with each other. From Day One, so to speak, Christ was proclaimed as the Exalted One, seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

The details of the resurrection-exaltation kerygma are of course a matter of debate. For the present argument it is not necessary to run into a more detailed analysis (the designation “resurrection-exaltation” sufficiently catches what is at stake), but it must be acknowledged that the issues involved are difficult. Is “exaltation” an inter-[328]pretation of the resurrection event or is “resurrection” simply a narrative expression of belief in Jesus’ exaltation? Or were they at some early stage in the tradition perhaps more or less competing interpretations of the Easter event? And where do the post-Easter “appearances” fit in?²⁴

Gerhard Lohfink has tried to articulate the relation between resurrection and exaltation as follows: “Auferweckung und Erhöhung meinen im Urchristentum dasselbe Ereignis. Die Auferweckung formuliert dieses Ereignis jedoch im Hinblick auf seinen terminus a quo, die Erhöhung im Hinblick auf seinen terminus ad quem”.²⁵ If Lohfink is right (as I think he is), this has at least two corollaries of immediate concern to the present quest. First, early Christian resurrection and exaltation texts imply or presuppose the notion of heavenly ascent, even if this is not stated *expressis verbis*. It is

²² This exegesis is a matter of dispute. *Pace* J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38A; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1988) 15–16, I take ἐξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν in its present context as a condensed (liturgical?) idiom for ἐκ τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν.

²³ The traditional basis of this text is a matter of dispute, see the commentaries *ad loc.* and the discussion in Chapter 7 (“Jesus Made Both Lord and Christ”) of the present work.

²⁴ See the discussion in J. Lambrecht, “De oudste Christologie. Verrijzenis of verhoging?”, *Bijdr.* 36 (1975) 118–144; Dupont, “Assis” 211–216.

²⁵ Unfortunately space does not permit to elaborate on this point; see Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt* 97, followed by E. Schillebeeckx, *Jezus. Het verhaal van een levende* (Baarn: H. Nelissen, 1974, ⁸1982) 436. Also E. Ruckstuhl, “Auferstehung, Erhöhung und Himmelfahrt Jesu” (1968); repr. in: idem, *Jesus im Horizont der Evangelien* (SBAB 3; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988) 194, who concludes that in the New Testament “die Erhöhung Jesu ... mit seiner Auferstehung sachlich und zeitlich zusammenfällt und ihre Reichweite umschreibt” (italicised in the original); L. Goppelt, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (ed. J. Roloff; UTB 850; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976, ³1978) 285–287.

not without justification that Klaus Berger speaks of “Auferstehung in den Himmel hinein”.²⁶ Second, if this is correct, in the earliest sources the post-Easter appearances must have been understood as appearances from heaven, manifestations of the *already* exalted Lord.²⁷

3. Defining Exaltation, Ascension and Rapture

If all this is a fair assessment of how Jesus’ post-death status was commonly understood in the early church, where (if at all) does the Lukan ascension story fit in? If Luke’s ascension story is a story about Jesus’ heavenly *exaltation* (his *sessio ad dexteram Dei*), as e.g. Gerhard Lohfink, Eric Franklin²⁸ and others would have it, one has to provide a clear rationale why Luke felt compelled to redraw the traditional lines of early Christian Easter faith by [329] postponing Christ’s exaltation for forty days. Such a rationale is all the more required since there are indications in Luke-Acts, as Lohfink admits, that Luke was well aware of the primitive resurrection-exaltation kerygma (e.g. Acts 2:32–35; 5:30–32; 13:33–34).²⁹

As I observed earlier, there is an obvious need for clear definitions, especially with regard to the notions of “exaltation”, “ascension” and “rapture”. Before we can determine whether or not it is appropriate to interpret the Lukan ascension story in exaltation terms, one has to be clear about the content of these terms.

First of all, I would like to make some comments on the notion of “exaltation”. Taken in its most literal sense (*exaltare* “to lift up, to raise on high”) the ascension story is clearly an exaltation scene.³⁰ There can be no question about that. But this is not how “exaltation” is being used in the current scholarly debate. Exaltation in the technical sense of the term has to do with a rise of status, it has to do with an investment with authority. An angelic

²⁶ Berger, *Die Auferstehung des Propheten und die Erhöhung des Menschensohnes. Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Deutung des Geschickes Jesu in frühchristlichen Texten* (StUNT 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976) 207.

²⁷ Cf. R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (ed. O. Merk; UTB.W 630; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1948, ⁹1984) 48; Goppelt, *Theologie* 286–287; Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie* 1:172–175.

²⁸ E. Franklin, “The Ascension and the Eschatology of Luke-Acts”, *SJTh* 23 (1970) 191–200; idem, *Christ the Lord. A Study in the Purpose and Theology of Luke-Acts* (London: SPCK, 1975) 9–47.

²⁹ Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt* 240. I have discussed these and other resurrection and exaltation texts in chapter V of my *Ascension of the Messiah*.

³⁰ Cf. J.A. Fitzmyer, “The Ascension of Christ and Pentecost” (1984); repr. in: idem, *To Advance the Gospel. New Testament Studies* (BibRS; Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans; Livonia: Dove, ²1998) 266, who defines “exaltation” as “his [Christ’s] being taken up to the glorious presence of the Father (...)”.

being ascending (back) to heaven³¹ is not “exalted” in this sense of the word.

In his now classic study on the christological titles Ferdinand Hahn has argued that “exaltation” (*Erhöhung*) “nicht nur das Motiv einer Auffahrt in den Himmel impliziert ..., sondern vornehmlich die auf Grund eines Inthronisationsaktes verliehene besondere Würde und die Einsetzung in eine Machtstellung bezeichnet”.³² He further argued that it is relatively easy to trace the exaltation motif in the New Testament, “weil sie durchweg [consistently!] mit einem ganz bestimmten alttestamentlichen Zitat verbunden ist”, that is, Psalm 110:1.³³ If the use of this psalm is a valid criterion for classifying a statement as an exaltation statement, the Lukan ascension story clearly falls out. This in obvious contrast with the later ending of Mark, where we do find a clear allusion to Psalm 110:1 in the immediate context of the ascension: “(the Lord Jesus) ἀνελήμφθη εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐκάθισεν ἐκ δεξιῶν τοῦ θεοῦ” (Mk 16:19). How significant is it that in the ascension story Luke does not refer to this exaltation psalm *par excellence*, although he does cite the psalm on various other occasions?

It may be rightly objected, however, that Hahn’s definition presets the terms of the argument by unduly narrowing down the notion of exaltation to the (implicit or explicit) use of a single psalm. Granted that Psalm 110 was [330] important (if not constitutive) in the formation of the early Christian exaltation kerygma,³⁴ it may very well be that the concept at a given point of time has begun to lead a life of its own. It is therefore methodologically safer to take the whole range of exaltation and throne imagery into consideration. As a number of specialist studies have shown, first-century Judaism has an impressive list of venerable historical figures “exalted to heaven” or at least with a heavenly status.³⁵ Many speculations, e.g., were built on the plurality of thrones in Daniel 7:9.³⁶ Recent studies on the latest Qumran publications have shown the sectarians’ interest in exalted figures in heaven (*infra*). However, as soon as one critically glances over the exaltation texts under consideration, “exaltation” appears to be quite an elusive term. In many cases it is no more than a metaphorical expression of praise, which is not necessarily connected with the end of one’s life (if it has such a “biographical” *Sitz im Leben* at all). A clear (non-Qumran) example of

³¹ Gen 17:22; 35:13; Jub 32:20; 4 Bar 3:17; Jdt 6:21; Tob 12:20–22 S; TAb B 4:4.

³² Hahn, *Hoheitstitel* 126.

³³ Hahn, *Hoheitstitel* 127, now accepted by Hengel, “Setze dich” 120.

³⁴ Hengel, “Setze dich” *passim*.

³⁵ J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making. An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM, 1980, ²1989), esp. 129–162; L.W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord. Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (London: SCM, 1988, ²1998).

³⁶ Cf. also Ps 122:5. See e.g. TAb A 11:4–18 (Adam); 1 En 45:3; 51:3; 55:4; 61:8; 69:27–29 (the Elect One); 11QMelch (Melchizedek); TJob 33:2–3 (Job); TBenj 10:6 (Enoch, Seth, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob); cf. bSan 38b.

this genre is found in Ezekiel the Tragedian, which describes a (visionary!) heavenly exaltation (an act of enthronement!) of Moses.³⁷

In the majority of cases exaltation does not convey the notion of bodily ascent (rapture), only the souls are being transported to heaven. Most of the exalted figures of first-century Judaism had died a natural death in the biblical tradition. Exaltation language, therefore, does not always have to be taken with strict literalness, i.e. a person exalted *by* God (to a higher rank) need not necessarily be exalted *to* God (in heaven).³⁸

The second term in need of further qualification is “ascension”. This term is as ambiguous as “exaltation”, since it conveys a wide range of connotations. Form-critically, “ascension” is best taken as a collective term. In his excellent [331] doctoral dissertation on the Lukan ascension and exaltation texts, Gerhard Lohfink has focussed attention on the wide variety of ascension language in the ancient sources.³⁹ On the basis of a full-scale investigation of the relevant texts in Graeco-Roman and Jewish sources, he managed to identify a number of different ascension types: the heavenly journey or ascent to heaven (*Himmelsreise*), the assumption of the soul (*Aufnahme der Seele*), the rapture (*Entrückung*), the ascent at the end of an appearance, etc. etc. Since genre determines reading strategy, it is essential to specify what type of ascension is being used in a given context.

Third, different from both “exaltation” and “ascension”, the notion of “rapture” (in the sense of *leibliche Entrückung*) represents a relatively clear-cut conceptualization to the exclusion of others. I define “rapture” as *a bodily translation into the “beyond” as the conclusion of one’s earthly life without the intervention of death*.⁴⁰ This type of ascension is clearly distinguished

³⁷ Ezekiel the Tragedian, as quoted by Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.29 and Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.23 (155,1–7); *GCS* 52/2:96–98, both citing Alexander Polyhistor [ed. A.-M. Denis, *Fragmenta pseudepigraphorum que supersunt graeca una cum historicorum et auctorum Judaeorum hellenistarum fragmentis* (SVTP 3; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970) 210f.], describes a heavenly exaltation vision of Moses at Mt. Sinai, describing his investiture as king (σκηπτρον δέ μοι παρέδωκε καὶ εἰς θρόνον μέγαν / εἶπεν καθῆσθαι βασιλικὸν δ’ ἔδωκέ μοι / διάδημα καὶ αὐτὸς ἐκ θρόνων χωρίζεται) and his installation to the prophetic office (ᾧψει τὰ τ’ ὄντα τὰ τε προτοῦ τὰ θ’ ὕστερον).

³⁸ See H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, H.S. Jones, R. McKenzie et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon. With a Revised Supplement 1996* (Oxford: Clarendon, [1843], 1940/1996) 1910; W. Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur* (eds. K. und B. Aland; Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988) 1695–1696; G. Bertram, “Der religionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund des Begriffs der ‘Erhöhung’ in der Septuaginta”, *ZAW* 68 (1956) 57–71; idem, “Erhöhung”, *RAC* 6 (1966) 22–43; idem, ὕψος, ὑψόω, κτλ., *ThWNT* 8 (1969) 600–619.

³⁹ Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt* 32–79.

⁴⁰ Cf. with varying degrees of precision, the definitions by F.R. Walton, “Entrückung”, *RGG*³ 2 (1958) 499: “Entrückung ist im Unterschied zur Auferstehung der leibliche Übergang eines menschlichen Wesens aus diesem Leben in die andere Welt, ohne daß der Tod dazwischen tritt”; H. Wissmann, “Entrückung I. Religionsgeschichtlich”, *TRE* 9 (1982)

from other trips to heaven. First, a rapture is definitive, in contrast with the heavenly journey (*Himmelsreise*) type of ascension (e.g. the Enoch apocalypses, TAb B 8:2ff.), which purports to give esoteric revelations to earthlings, requiring therefore almost by definition the seer's return to the earth.⁴¹ Second, a rapture involves the whole person, soul *and* body, in contrast with an exaltation in mystic experience (as e.g. in Merkabah mysticism)⁴² or with the assumption of the soul after death. Third, it involves a transportation to heaven⁴³ rather than a miraculous transit from one place on earth to another (e.g. Ezech. 11:24; Acts 8:39). And, fourth, perhaps the most distinguishing formal feature, there is no death experience, as opposed to an assumption of the soul (*Aufnahme der Seele*), which is in fact no more than a metaphorical description of dying (e.g. TAb B 14:6–7).

All these qualifications are not intended to deny the fact – and this must be stressed with all due emphasis – that there is a large degree of overlap in the [332] terminology used. Not infrequently, for example, death terminology is used for persons taken up alive into heaven, although *stricto sensu* rapture and death are mutually exclusive conceptualizations.⁴⁴ But on level of content the lines of demarcation between the various forms can be neatly drawn. The point of rapture belief is that one does *not* die and descend into Sheol.

I fully agree with Lohfink and others that *formgeschichtlich* the Lukan ascension story belongs to the “rapture” (*Entrückung*) type of ascension. However, a closer look into the “mechanics” of rapture thinking in the ancient world reveals that one should be hesitant to subsume all raptures under the same category.

The “rapture” category appears to be a rather widely used concept in ancient sources.⁴⁵ Rapture reports are found in Akkadian and Sumerian

680: “Entrückung umschreibt die Vorstellung, daß ein sterblicher Mensch aufgrund einer göttlichen Einwirkung in ein jenseitiges Reich versetzt wird, ohne durch den Tod gehen zu müssen”.

⁴¹ On this genre see A.F. Segal, “Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and Their Environment”, *ANRW* 2.23.2 (1980) 1333–1394; M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴² See D.J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot. Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (TSAJ 16; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988).

⁴³ Or at least to a far-away region that under normal circumstances is unattainable for mortal human beings, such as Elysium (Homer, *Odyssey* 4.563 Ἠλύσιον πεδίον), the Isles of the Blessed Ones (Hesiod, *Opera et dies* 171 μακάρων νῆσοι), Dilmun, Paradise, etc.

⁴⁴ E.g. Jub 7:39; 4 Ezra 7:15; 8:5; 10:34; 2 Bar 44:2; 46:1; 78:5; 84:1; *LAB* 48:1; Josephus, *Ant* 4.8.49 (330); *LCL* 242:634. Cf. also Berger, *Auferstehung* 113^e and 388–389 Anm. 516.

⁴⁵ For what follows see Zwiep, *Ascension* 36ff. Many ascension texts can be found in C. Colpe, “Himmelfahrt”, *RAC* 15 (1991) 212–219; idem, E. Dassmann, E. Engemann, P. Habermehl, “Jenseitsfahrt I. Himmelfahrt”, *RAC* 17 (1995) 407–466.

Flood texts,⁴⁶ in the Old Testament (Enoch and Elijah)⁴⁷ and in particular in Graeco-Roman literature.⁴⁸ In the Homeric tradition Ganymede was taken up to the realm of the gods to become the cupbearer of Zeus (Homer, *Iliad* 20.233–235; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.159–161). Menelaos, son-in-law of Zeus, was promised to escape death and to be transferred to Elysium (Homer, *Odyssey* 4.561–565; cf. Euripides, *Helena* 1676–1677). Hesiod reports the rapture of the heroes of the fourth generation (Hesiod, *Opera et dies* 167–173), and Philostratus has a most vivid story about the heavenly assumption of Apollonius of Tyana (Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 8.29–30). Among the most popular and well-remembered ascension stories in the Hellenistic world were those about Heracles, the son of Zeus and Alcmena,⁴⁹ and about Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome.⁵⁰

In the Graeco-Roman rapture tradition we find an impressive number of motifs that appear in Luke 24 and Acts 1 as well. To mention only a few: the cloud as a heavenly means of transport, the mountain as a stepping-stone into [333] eternity, the emphasis on the visibility of the event and closely connected with that the presence of eye-witnesses (according to Lohfink the rapture form even stands or falls with the motif of eye-witnesses), the notion of joy of the by-standers, the element of worship (προσκύνησις), etc. etc.⁵¹

A few examples may suffice to illustrate in more detail the close verbal agreements between Luke's narrative and the Hellenistic ascension stories. A clear parallel to Acts 1:9 is found in the *Antiquitates Romanae* of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, where at the end of a divine epiphany (!) it says: ταῦτα δὲ εἰπόντα νέφει περικαλυφθῆναι καὶ ἀπὸ γῆς ἀρθέντα φέρεσθαι δι' ἀέρος ἄνω (*Antiquitates Romanae* 1.77.2). With this compare the wording of Luke in the Acts version: καὶ ταῦτα εἰπὼν βλέπόντων αὐτῶν ἐπήρθη καὶ νεφέλη ὑπέλαβεν αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν (Acts 1:9). In Plutarch, *Numa* 2.4, we read Proculus' report on the assumption of Romulus: he swore Ῥωμύλον ἰδεῖν εἰς οὐρανὸν ...

⁴⁶ See the examples discussed in A. Schmitt, *Entrückung – Aufnahme – Himmelfahrt. Untersuchungen zu einem Vorstellungsbereich im AT* (FzB 10; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1973, ²1976) 4–45.

⁴⁷ Schmitt, *Entrückung* 47–192.

⁴⁸ E. Rohde, *Psyche. Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen* I–II (mit einer Einführung von O. Weinreich; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, ²1898, ^{9,10}1925); Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt*, 32–50; G. Friedrich, “Lk 9,51 und die Entrückungschristologie des Lukas”, in: P. Hoffmann, N. Brox, W. Pesch (eds.), *Orientierung an Jesus. Zur Theologie der Synoptiker. FS J. Schmid* (Freiburg: Herder, 1973) 51–54.

⁴⁹ Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.7.7; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 4.38.5; Euripides, *Heraclidae* 910; *Lysias* 2.11; Lucian, *Cynicus* 13; *Hermotimus* 7; Cicero, *Tusculanae* 1.14.32.

⁵⁰ Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.16.1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 2.63.3–4; cf. 2.56.2; Plutarch, *Romulus* 27.5–28.1; *Numa* 2.2–3; *Camillus* 32.5; 33.7; Aurelius Victor, *De viris illustribus* 2.13.

⁵¹ Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt* 32–50; A. Weiser, “Himmelfahrt Christi I. Neues Testament”, *TRE* 15 (1986) 332.

ἀναφερόμενον. Αναφέρομαι (εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν), which is found elsewhere in Hellenistic ascension stories,⁵² is also the terminology employed by Luke at the end of his gospel (Lk 24:51). A brief notice in Seneca, “Drusillam euntem in caelum vidit”,⁵³ in wording very much looks like Acts 1:10 ἀτενίζοντες ἦσαν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν πορευομένου αὐτοῦ, and Acts 1:11 ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν.

The number of parallels, both verbal and conceptual, that can be drawn from Hellenistic sources is in fact almost infinite. In the Graeco-Roman tradition the rapture phenomenon seems to have collapsed into a literary convention⁵⁴ with variations in the *dramatis personae* and narrative details only! This goes so far that even more enlightened spirits made free use of the rapture narration model without any sense of embarrassment. There can be little or no doubt, then, that the Greek and Roman readers of Luke-Acts would notice and appreciate such similarities, especially if they would tie the spectacular end of Jesus’ earthly career to its miraculous beginning.⁵⁵ Nor should one think that Luke feared the comparison being made. It is not surprising that modern scholarship has focussed its attention almost exclusively on the [334] comparison of the ascension with the Hellenistic rapture type, helped of course by the fact that Luke was a non-Jew.⁵⁶

4. In Search of the Proper Language Game

It needs to be stressed, however, that this approach has led to one-sided results. First, although we find a number of individual points of correspondence, no satisfying explanation can be given for a number of other, more structural points of agreement. The notion of the forty days, for example, plays no role in the Graeco-Roman ascension stories.⁵⁷ If appearances are

⁵² In addition to Plutarch, *Numa* 2.4; Antoninus Liberalis 25.4; Hesiod, frgm 148 (A. Rzach): τὸν Ἐνδυμίωνα ἀνενεχθῆναι εἰς οὐρανόν; Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* (rec. H. Keil) 4.57, 58 p.264, 17 (Bauer 124–125); cf. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 56.42.3: ἀετος δέ τις ἐξ αὐτῆς ἀφεθεῖς ἀνίπτατο ὡς καὶ δὴ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ (sc. of Augustus) ἐς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀναφέρων.

⁵³ Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* 1.2. The context is satirical, but the language conventional.

⁵⁴ Cf. Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.14.62, who calls it a *consuetudo communis*.

⁵⁵ According to C.H. Talbert, “The Concept of Immortals in Mediterranean Antiquity”, *JBL* 94 (1975) 419–436, there was a tendency to accredit famous historical figures with myths about their beginning (miraculous birth) and their end (ascent to heaven) as “precondition” for immortality. Anticipating the discussion below, I observe that Talbert is hesitant to apply this to the Jesus-event.

⁵⁶ Despite occasional voices to the contrary, see e.g. W.J. Barnard, P. van ’t Riet, *Lukas de Jood. Een joodse inleiding op het evangelie van Lukas en de Handelingen der Apostelen* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1984).

⁵⁷ P.W. van der Horst, “Hellenistic Parallels to the Acts of the Apostles (1,1–26)”, *ZNW* 74 (1983) 19. H. Klein, in his review on my *Ascension*, in: *ThLZ* 123 (1998) 753, objects: “(...) bei uns im Osten glaubt man, daß die Toten 40 Tage zwischen Himmel und Erde schweben,

conjoined to an ascension (so e.g. in the case of the Romulus traditions), these appearances are post-rapture, not pre-rapture as in Luke 24 and Acts 1.⁵⁸ In Luke-Acts the ascension is set in immediate relation to the (eschatological) return of Jesus (Acts 1:11), a feature which does not fit so easily into a Graeco-Roman worldview.

A more fundamental objection to an exclusively Hellenistic understanding of the Lukan ascension story is a methodological one. As a number of specialist studies have shown, in Graeco-Roman sources the concept of “rapture” (*Entrückung*) is closely bound up with (not to say identical with) the idea of deification or divinization: a person who ascends to the gods becomes a divine being himself. His or her ascension is a stepping-stone into immortality and divinity. In the large majority of Hellenistic rapture stories we find deification vocabulary as a standard feature.⁵⁹ The proposition “Romulus has gone to heaven” is materially identical with “Romulus has become a god” and *vice versa*, i.e. the proposition “Romulus has become a god” implies his previous ascent to the world of the gods. The inner logic of the connection between rapture and divinization is clarified by Dieter Roloff as follows: “Da bei einer anthropomorphen Gottesvorstellung die Unsterblichkeit das wesentliche Merkmal des Göttlichen ist, bedeutet die Aufhebung des Todes als die [335] Aufhebung dessen, was den Heros vom Göttlichen trennt, seinen Übergang ins Göttliche, seine Erhebung zur Göttlichkeit”.⁶⁰ In an attempt to define what is constitutive for the status of an “immortal” as contrasted with that of an “eternal”, Charles Talbert suggests: “The protagonist is first of all a mortal – though perhaps so extraordinary as to be regarded in some sense as divine during his lifetime, but mortal nonetheless. At the end of his career, by the decree or act of some eternal, he is taken up into heaven, becomes immortal, and takes his place in the pantheon of the gods”.⁶¹ Talbert further argues that the ascent to heaven is a crucial characteristic of the immortals: “(...) whenever Mediterranean peoples spoke about the immortals, constant in their description was the explicit or implicit idea that ‘he was taken up into heaven’”.⁶² Lohfink

bis sie entweichen”, thinking this invalidates an exclusively Jewish-apocalyptic background of the forty days and suggesting that this may be an argument to re-open the question of sources.

⁵⁸ Cf. Talbert, “Concept of Immortals” 422.

⁵⁹ See Zwiep, *Ascension* 39 n.1, for a list of relevant terms and references. For a brief survey of the Graeco-Roman concept of God and deification, see P.W. van der Horst, “Kortnotities over het godsbegrip bij Grieken en Romeinen en de vergoddelijking van Jezus in het Nieuwe Testament”, *Bijdr.* 57 (1996) 149–157.

⁶⁰ D. Roloff, *Gottähnlichkeit, Vergöttlichung und Erhöhung zu seligem Leben. Untersuchungen zur Herkunft der platonischen Angleichung an Gott* (UALG 4; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970) 84.

⁶¹ Talbert, “Concept of Immortals” 429.

⁶² Talbert, “Concept of Immortals” 421.

puts it similarly: “Entrückung und Vergöttlichung sind im hellenistischen Denken so fest miteinander verbunden, daß die Entrückung oft das eigentliche Kriterium dafür bildet, ob ein Mensch vergöttlicht wurde oder nicht”.⁶³ And: “Die Entrückung ist die einzige Art und Weise, wie überhaupt ein Gott, der auf Erden gelebt hat, standesgemäß scheiden kann. Jeder andere Abgang von der irdischen Bühne wird als unpassend empfunden”.⁶⁴

This, evidently, need occasion no surprise in a context of polytheistic religiosity, a context of which Petronius mockingly said: “the gods walk abroad so commonly in our streets that it is easier to meet a god than a man”.⁶⁵ But it seems to me that it is crucial at this point to avoid the “religion-historical fallacy”. One of my criticisms of Lohfink’s otherwise outstanding work is that he has placed the ascension story *too firmly* in the Hellenistic rapture tradition. To make my point clear I may quote perhaps a passage from my *Ascension of the Messiah*, which is in fact crucial to my argument:

This [= the connection between rapture and divinization] being the case, we might wonder whether in a tradition where the lines between mortals and the gods were more sharply drawn (as in the Jewish-Christian monotheistic tradition) rapture stories were read with the same set of assumptions and connotations in mind as in a polytheistic context. Similarities of language and form do not necessarily imply ideological correspondence. Although in some quarters of first-century Judaism, [336] e.g., historical figures of Israel’s past were occasionally elevated, even up to the status of θεός c.q. אֱלֹהִים [as, e.g., in the writings of Philo and the Dead Sea Scrolls], there is little evidence (at least in the period relevant to the present investigation) that this has affected or compromised its basic belief in monotheism, because it perceived this type of divinity in an attenuated, non-literal, sense. A literalistic conception would be near to blasphemy to the Jewish mind. Granted that rapture thinking has found an accepted place in OT-Jewish belief and provides the conceptual horizon of understanding for the ascension of Jesus in Luke-Acts, the critical question is how rapture thinking *functioned* within a first-century Jewish (and Christian) context. Did first century Jews and Christians consider rapture also as a means of deification and as the commencement of an immortal existence in glory? How (and how successfully) was rapture thinking integrated into the Jewish and Christian worlds of belief?⁶⁶

For the sake of clarity, in some contemporary Jewish sources divine categories are being applied to human beings, even in the context of a heavenly ascent. Some of the relevant texts in the Dead Sea Scrolls have been

⁶³ Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt* 46.

⁶⁴ Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt* 48.

⁶⁵ Petronius, *Satyricon* 17: “Utique nostra regio tam praesentibus plena est numinibus, ut facilius possis deum quam hominem invenire”. Cf. also the complaint of Jupiter in Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* 9: “Olim, inquit (Jove) magna res erat deum fieri: iam Fabam minum fecistis”. Also the writings of Lucian.

⁶⁶ Quoted from Zwiep, *Ascension* 39–40. For what is at issue in the current debate on first-century Jewish monotheism, see the recent assessment by L.W. Hurtado, “First-Century Jewish Monotheism”, *JSNT* 71 (1998) 3–26.

discussed recently by M. Smith,⁶⁷ James Davila⁶⁸ and others. Texts such as 11QMelchizedek (11Q13) and the mysterious “Self-Glorification Hymn” in the War Scroll (4Q491 frag. 11 I 13–24) have been explained (with differing degrees of plausibility) in terms of a real apotheosis of a human being. It remains to be seen, as far as I am concerned, whether such labels as “apotheosis” and “deification” are appropriate in these texts. Perhaps the “angelomorphic” category⁶⁹ provides a more fruitful entry into the unravelling of these mysterious texts. Ignoring for the moment the fact that these texts are exceptional and that the identity of the persons involved is not always very clear, it should be noted that in most of these and similar cases of “deification” the context is either visionary, mystical or metaphorical. The critical question is whether deification language is used in a non-visionary *rapture* context. [337]

5. The Rapture Phenomenon in Early Jewish Sources

In an attempt to find out whether the ascension of Jesus can be better understood in (partially or predominantly) Jewish rapture categories, it is necessary to discover what the ideological framework underlying early Jewish rapture thinking is. First of all we must put the matter in the right proportions. In the Old Testament there are only two persons who escape death by being taken up alive into the presence of God. Of Enoch it is said that “he walked with God; and he was no more, because God took him (away)” (Gen. 5:24), a brief mysterious remark, yet in its context clear enough for readers to conclude that Enoch escaped death and was now in God’s presence.⁷⁰ More spectacular is the description of Elijah’s ascent into heaven: “As they [Elijah and Elisha] continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended (LXX ἀνελήμθη) in a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11 NRSV). But this is all the Old Testament has about raptures. On the other hand, the late Talmudic treatise

⁶⁷ M. Smith, “Ascent to the Heavens and Deification in 4QM^a”, in: L.H. Schiffman (ed.), *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The New York University Conference in Memory of Yigael Yadin* (JSPE.S 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 181–188; idem, “Two Ascended to Heaven – Jesus and the Author of 4Q491”, in: J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (AncBRL; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 290–301.

⁶⁸ J.R. Davila, “Heavenly Ascents in the Dead Sea Scrolls”, in: P.W. Flint, J.C. VanderKam (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls After Fifty Years. A Comprehensive Assessment 2* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 1999) 461–485.

⁶⁹ See C.H.T. Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts. Angels, Christology and Soteriology* (WUNT 2. Reihe 94; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

⁷⁰ See Zwiep, *Ascension* 41–42, where I list the arguments in favour of a rapture reading of Gen 5:24.

*Derek Erez Zutta*⁷¹ preserves a more elaborate catalogue of rapture candidates:

There were nine who entered the Garden of Eden alive, viz.: Enoch the son of Yered, Elijah, the Messiah, Eliezer the servant of Abraham, Hiram, king of Tyre, Ebed-melech the Cushite, Jabez the son of R. Judah the Prince, Bithiah the daughter of Pharaoh, and Serah, the daughter of Asher. Some say: Also R. Joshua b. Levi.⁷²

Much is unclear in this list, especially the criteria for inclusion (and non-inclusion!) of the persons involved. But the interesting point is that the number of raptures is limited to *only* nine or ten persons. This is of course a noticeable expansion in comparison with the Old Testament, where Enoch and Elijah are the only mortals to escape the fate of all human beings. But compared to the sheer innumerable rapture claims in the Jewish *Umwelt*, esp. in the Graeco-Roman world, nine or ten persons is a very modest figure still. In contrast with its *Umwelt*, the Jewish rapture phenomenon does not seem to have fallen prey to “universalisation” or “democratisation”. Rapture remained a privilege for only some men of outstanding piety.

[338] This, however, may just be another way of saying that in early Judaism the rapture category has always been somewhat suspect. Targum Onqelos on Genesis 5:24, in fact, flatly denies that Enoch had escaped death at the end of his life: “he was no more, for the Lord had caused him to die” (וליתיהוה ארי אמית יהיה יי).⁷³ In addition to the fact that rapture thinking later found general acceptance in predominantly Christian circles, “rapture” is in a way a strange intruder into first-century Jewish thinking. That a human being would escape death and Sheol is in flat contradiction with the universal rule laid down in Genesis 3:19 (“you are dust, and to dust you shall return”); Psalm 115:16 would also effectively discourage rapture speculations: “The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings” (NRSV). Furthermore, the Babylonian background of the Enoch

⁷¹ Cf. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)* (A New English Version Revised and Edited by G. Vermes, F. Millar, P. Vermes and M. Black; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973) 1:80, 89.

⁷² DEZ 1:18, ed. M. Higger, מוסכתוה דרין ארין *The Treatises Derek Erez* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Moinester, 1935) 68–70; transl. A. Cohen (ed.), *The Minor Tractates of the Talmud. Massektoth ketannoth* (London: Soncino, 1965) 2:570. Note that the textual tradition is confused. For similar lists (of later date) see M. Himmelfarb, “A Report on Enoch in Rabbinic Literature”, in: D.J. Lull (ed.), *The Society of Biblical Literature 1978 Seminar Papers* (SBL. SP 13; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1978) 261–262.

⁷³ See M. Aberbach, B. Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos to Genesis. A Critical Analysis Together With an English Translation of the Text (Based on A. Sperber’s Edition)* (Centre for Judaic Studies, University of Denver: Ktav, 1982) 48–49. Some textual witnesses have “the Lord did not (לא) cause him to die”, but this is clearly a scribal harmonisation, cf. Aberbach, Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos* 48–49 n.5, who argue that this is under the influence of the controversies with Christians and other sectarians.

myth,⁷⁴ the popularity of Enoch in predominantly sectarian circles, and the numerous competitive rapture stories in the Hellenistic (read: pagan) world would not create much sympathy with the rapture phenomenon. However, the fact was that Enoch and Elijah did have a firm place in the sacred scriptures of Israel and their alleged rapture had to be accepted *nolens volens*. This, in turn, attracted, at least in some circles, rapture speculations about other venerable figures of Israel's past. At the end of the first century C.E. we find at least six or seven biblical saints who were alleged to be taken up alive into heaven: Enoch, Elijah, Moses,⁷⁵ Ezra, Baruch and Phinehas (and perhaps Melchizedek, dependent on the dating of the source).⁷⁶ [339]

6. The Early Jewish Rapture-Preservation Paradigm

Most of the early Jewish rapture speculations developed according to a fixed pattern. The beginnings of “conventionalisation” of what I have called the rapture-preservation paradigm are found already within the canonical confines. In the closing words of the prophecy of Malachi, Elijah, the prophet who so dramatically was taken up alive into heaven (2 Kings 2:1–12), is promised to make his eschatological comeback: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn (ἀποκαταστήσει) the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal 4:5–6 NRSV; 3:22–23 LXX). In due course Enoch was believed to return in the eschaton as well. The earliest evidence is found in the Book of Dream Visions (second century B.C.E.): “Thereafter, those three who were wearing snow-white (clothes), the former ones who had caused me to go up, grabbed me by my hand – also holding the hand of that ram [= Elijah] holding me – and I [= Enoch] ascended [other manuscripts: they elevated me]; they set me down in the midst of those sheep prior to the occurrence of this judgment”.⁷⁷ 4 Ezra 6:26 also seems to have a reappearance of Enoch

⁷⁴ J.C. VanderKam, *Enoch and the Growth of an Apocalyptic Tradition* (CBQ.MS 16; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1984).

⁷⁵ Despite the clear affirmation in Deut 34:5–8 that Moses had died and was buried (albeit mysteriously), it was believed by some that he was taken up alive into heaven. In Zwiep, *Ascension* 67–69, I have argued circumstantially that Josephus, *Ant* 4.8.48 (326); *LCL* 242:632–633, may in fact indicate that this belief was already found in the first century C.E. Anticipating our discussion below, later Rabbinic sources also expect an eschatological return of Moses, though *not* in connection with belief in his rapture. Incidentally, the number forty plays a significant role in the biblical Moses tradition.

⁷⁶ I have analysed these rapture speculations in Zwiep, *Ascension* 36–79. Other rapture claims cannot be traced back with any confidence to the first century C.E., see Zwiep, *Ascension* 77 n.1.

⁷⁷ 1 En 90:31; ed. M.A. Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch. A New Edition in the Light of*

and Elijah in view, although their names are not mentioned: “And they shall see [at the end of this world, v. 25] the men who were taken up [*qui recepti sunt homines*], who from their birth have not tasted death ...”⁷⁸ In context it is clear that at least Enoch and Elijah are being referred to. In later Jewish and Christian sources Elijah and Enoch became steady companions in the eschatological course of events.⁷⁹

The rapture speculations did not only expand in a forward direction, but also backwards. Undoubtedly on the basis of the biblical affirmation that he “walked with אלהים”, in due course Enoch was accredited with temporary visits to heaven prior to his final ascent, usually in the form of visionary ascents. A most relevant development to the present debate is that the actual rapture event is being preceded by a period of final instructions, almost as a *conditio sine qua non*. In an addition to the Astronomical Writings Enoch’s ascension is preceded by a one-year period of final instructions to his disciples: “We shall let you stay with your son [= Methuselah] for one year, so that you may teach your children another law and write it down for them and give [340] all of them a warning; and in the second year, you shall be taken away from (among) all of them”.⁸⁰

In another group of writings the connection between rapture and return is even more firmly established. Here we recognise the growth of a “narration model”. The large contours of this narration scheme are as follows. The rapture is usually announced in advance in some revelatory experience, either as a divine word of instruction or as a remark by the author [= ADV]. In preparation of the event to come, the rapture candidate is commanded to instruct those that stay behind to ensure that his teachings will not perish. This period of final instructions [= INS] is not infrequently a period of forty days (forty being a quite conventional biblical number of course). The highly standardised description of the rapture [= RAP] is usually conjoined with a remark about the local and temporal *termini ad quem* of the raptured person’s preservation in heaven [= PRS] and his envisaged role in the end-time drama, not infrequently with an eschatological return implied [= ESCH]. In what follows this scheme is illustrated from some of the relevant sources.

The first example comes from the Fourth Book of Ezra, to be dated at the end of first century C.E.⁸¹ In the seventh vision of the book it is announced

the Aramaic Dead Sea Fragments (Oxford, New York: Clarendon, 1978) 1:336–337; transl. E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch. A New Translation and Introduction”, *OTP* 1 (1983) 71.

⁷⁸ 4 Ezra 6:26; ed. A.F.J. Klijn (ed.), *Der lateinische Text der Apokalypse des Esra. Mit einem Index Grammaticus von G. Mussies* (TU 131; Berlin: Akademie, 1983); transl. B.M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra. A New Translation and Introduction”, *OTP* 1 (1983) 535.

⁷⁹ For references and secondary literature, see Zwiep, *Ascension* 48–49 (+ n.1).

⁸⁰ 1 En 81:6; ed. Knibb, *Enoch* 1:268–269; transl. Isaac, “1 Enoch” 59.

⁸¹ Introductory matters and bibliographical references on Fourth Ezra are found in

that Ezra, the biblical priest and scribe, rebuilder of the temple, will depart from earth without the intervention of death (4 Ezra 14:9) [= ADV], that is, he is promised to be taken up alive into heaven in much the same way as it happened to Enoch and Elijah (cf. 4 Ezra 6:26; 8:51–52). Ezra’s impending rapture is explicitly conjoined with an affirmation of his (and others’) temporary sojourn in heaven in preparation for a future task in the endtime: “for you shall be taken up [*recipieris*] from among men [= RAP], and henceforth you shall live with my Son [= the Messiah] and with those who are like you [= Enoch and Elijah] [= PRS], until the times are ended [*usquequo finiantur tempora*]”.⁸² His presence in heaven is set a temporal *terminus ad quem*, “until the times are ended” [= ESCH]. This seems to implicate Ezra’s return to earth, a suggestion that is strengthened by the comparison with Enoch and Elijah (*similes tui*). With regard to Ezra’s pre-rapture condition, it is said that before he will be taken away he must instruct five men over a period of forty days⁸³ to ensure his secret wisdom will not be lost to later generations [= INS]. The Syriac version continues with what in all likelihood represents the original ending of the book: “... in the seventh year of the sixth week, five [341] thousand years and three months and twelve days after creation. At that time Ezra was caught up [= RAP], and taken to the place of those who are like him, after he had written all these things. And he was called the Scribe of the knowledge of the Most High for ever and ever”.⁸⁴ That Ezra would be called “scribe of the knowledge of the Most High” seems to point to his role in the last judgement [= ESCH]. Ezra’s rapture is a catalyst for speculations about his post-rapture condition (preservation in heaven, return in the endtime, an active role on the day of judgement) as well as the period leading up to his taking up (forty days of final instructions to prepare his disciples for the period of his absence).

The second example is found in the Second (Syriac) Apocalypse of Baruch (2 Baruch), to be dated at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century C.E.⁸⁵ Second Baruch represents a stream of tradition that is paralleled by Fourth Ezra. Regardless of how one resolves the literary relationship between the two books (whether Second Baruch is dependent on Fourth Ezra or *vice versa*, or whether the two books draw from common tradition), the parallel traditions seem to confirm the tendency to apply the

Metzger, “Fourth Ezra” 516–524; Schürer et al., *History* 3.1:294–306; M.E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra. A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1990) 1–47.

⁸² 4 Ezra 14:9 ed. Klijn, *Apokalypse des Esra* 87; transl. Metzger, “Fourth Ezra” 553.

⁸³ 4 Ezra 14:23, 36, 42, 44, 45.

⁸⁴ 4 Ezra 14:48 *v.l.* (transl. Metzger, “Fourth Ezra” 555 n. p.).

⁸⁵ Introductory matters and bibliographical references on Second Baruch are found in A.F.J. Klijn, “2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch. A New Translation and Introduction”, *OTP* 1 (1983) 615–620; Schürer et al., *History* 3.2:750–756. Cf. also A. Laato, “The Apocalypse of the Syriac Baruch and the Date of the End”, *JSPE* 18 (1998) 39–46.

rapture phenomenon to a wider circle than the two or three biblical *rapti*. In 2 Baruch 76 it says about Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah:

And he [= the *angelus interpretis*] answered and said to me [= Baruch]: Since the revelation of this vision has been explained to you as you prayed for, hear the word of the Most High that you know that which will happen to you after these things. For you will surely depart from this world, nevertheless not to death but to be kept unto (the end) of times [*ad reservationem temporum*]. Therefore, go up to the top of this mountain, and all countries of this earth will pass before you, as well as the likeness of the inhabited world, and the top of the mountains, and the depths of the valleys, and the depths of the seas, and the number of rivers, so that you may see that which you leave and whither you go. This will happen after forty days [*hoc autem continget post quadraginta dies*]. Go, therefore, now during these days and instruct the people as much as you can so that they may learn lest they die in the last times, but may learn so that they live in the last times.⁸⁶

The passage is clearly styled after a Moses typology (cf. Deut 34:1–3). It is announced by an angel-interpreter [= ADV] that Baruch will escape death [= RAP] to be “kept unto (the end) of times” (v. 2), that is, he will be physically [342] taken up into heaven, where he will be preserved unto the end of times (i.e. the day of judgement) [= PRS]. At the final judgement he will stand up as a witness (13:3; cf. 25:1)⁸⁷ [= ESCH]. As in 4 Ezra 14, a forty day period of final instructions precedes the rapture (v. 4) [= INS].⁸⁸

A third example is found in the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, to be dated probably a few decades before the final composition of Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch.⁸⁹ The unknown author preserves a tradition about the rapture of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the priest, the wording of which is reminiscent of the Elijah story and which includes several (though not all) components of the rapture-preservation paradigm:

And now rise up and go from here and dwell in Danaben on the mountain and dwell there many years. And I will command my eagle, and he will nourish you [= Phinehas] there,

⁸⁶ 2 Bar. 76:1–5; ed. and Latin transl. M. Kmosko, *Liber apocalypseos Baruch filii Neriae. Translatus de graeco in syriacum; praefatus est, textum syriacum vocalium signis instruxit latine vertit notis illustravit M. Kmosko* (PS 2; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907) 1199–1201; Eng. transl. Klijn, “Second Baruch” 646.

⁸⁷ Except for the ambiguous 55:6, there is no explicit mention of Baruch’s *return* to earth, but unless we are to assume that the judgement takes place in heaven, this is implied. A comparison with 4 Ezra would confirm this.

⁸⁸ 2 Bar 76:1–5; ed. Kmosko 1199–1200; Latin translation from Kmosko 1199.1201; transl. Klijn, “Second Baruch” 646.

⁸⁹ Introductory matters and bibliographical references on *LAB* are found in D.J. Harrington, J. Cazeaux, C. Perrot, M. Bogaert, *Pseudo-Philon. Les Antiquités Bibliques I–II* (SC 229–230; Paris: Cerf, 1976); D.J. Harrington, “Pseudo-Philo. A New Translation and Introduction”, *OTP* 2 (1985) 297–303; Schürer et al., *History* 3.1:325–331; F.J. Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo. Rewriting the Bible* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 3–25; E. Reinmuth, *Pseudo-Philo und Lukas. Studien zum Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum und seiner Bedeutung für die Interpretation des lukanischen Doppelwerks* (WUNT 74; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994).

and you will not come down to mankind until [*quousque*] the time arrives and you be tested in that time; and you will shut up the heaven then, and by your mouth it will be opened up. And afterward you will be lifted up [*elevaberis*] into the place where those who were before you [*priores tui*] lifted up, and you will be there until [*quousque*] I remember the world. Then I will make you all come, and you will taste what is death [*gustabitis quod est mortis*]. And Phinehas went up and did all that the LORD commanded him.⁹⁰

In this case the rapture is a delaying measure to postpone the moment of death. Nevertheless, the large contours are the same: the rapture initiates a period of temporary preservation in heaven, waiting for an eschatological task to fulfill.

The fourth (but more remote) illustration of the conventional rapture-preservation scheme is found in the Second (Slavonic) Book of Enoch, the date of which unfortunately cannot be established with any certainty.⁹¹ According to Christfried Böttrich the groundwork of the Melchizedek story in chapters 71–72 (now extant in a longer and a shorter recension) may reach back into a pre-70 setting.⁹² Melchizedek, the foreseen successor of the priest Nir, the son of Methuselah, experienced a miraculous birth under bizarre circumstances (ch. 71).⁹³ When the wonder-child had been forty days in Nir's tent, the angel Michael came down to translate the child into Edem to preserve him from the coming flood, after which he would be established as “the head of priests” of the future (71:29). A striking difference between the J and A recension is that the former expects “another Melchizedek” (71:34, 37; 72:6 J), whereas the latter seems to envisage an eschatological role for Melchizedek himself: “Melkisedek will be the head of the priests in another generation” (71:33, 37; 72:2 A). The A recension of 2 Enoch 71:11 regards the rapture of the child to be born as some sort of punishment: “I shall receive [the child Melchizedek] in paradise, so that you will not be the father of a gift of God”. Anyway, the themes are reminiscent of Ezra's and Baruch's translation: a period of forty days preceding the rapture, a translation into heaven, a period of divine preservation that culminates in an eschatological role.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ LAB 48:1–2; ed. Harrington et al., *Pseudo-Philon* 1:320; transl. Harrington, “Pseudo-Philo” 362.

⁹¹ Introductory matters and bibliographic references on Second Enoch are found in F.I. Andersen, “2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch. A New Translation and Introduction. Appendix: 2 Enoch in *Merilo Pravednoe*”, *OTP* 1 (1983) 91–221; Schürer et al., *History* 3.2:746–750.

⁹² C. Böttrich, “Recent Studies in the *Slavonic Book of Enoch*”, *JSPE* 9 (1991) 40–41.

⁹³ 2 En 71–72; ed. A. Vaillant, *Le livre des secrets d'Hénoch. Text slave et traduction française* (Paris: Institut d'Études Slaves, 1952; repr. 1976) 69–84 (XXII–XXIII). Cf. also Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion (Adversus haereses)* 1.3, *Haeresis* 40.7; *GCS* 98:87–89.

⁹⁴ On other Melchizedek speculations, see F.L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition. A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (MSSNTS 30; Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University

There seems to be a clearly recognisable inner logic in the “rapture-preservation paradigm”. Starting from the premise that God’s salvation is to be experienced in *this* life, on *this* earth, dead people are to be brought back to life from their graves (this is an important presupposition behind resurrection belief) and *people taken up into the heavenly abode must return to earth, if they are to fulfil their God-given task in the eschatological drama*. This means that there is an organic connection between rapture and return. Since in each case a longer period of absence is to be expected, the continuity of the teaching of the prophet or master must be ensured. For this reason those who stay behind are given final instructions as an essential component of the genre.⁹⁵

For the present purpose we need not go into a detailed history of development. Tracing the lines of development is a most difficult task since a number [344] of influences is involved: Moses, Elijah, etc. So much is clear that in the final decades of the first century C.E. – that is, roughly in the period Luke-Acts came into being – we find a relatively clear narration scheme.

7. Luke-Acts and the Rapture-Preservation Paradigm

In 1961, Günther Haufe published a brief but stimulating article on what he called “[ein] Denkgesetz, das mit eiserner Konsequenz durchgehalten [wird]”.⁹⁶ He argued that in early Jewish belief only those historical figures could exercise an eschatological role who had entered the heavenly world by means of a bodily rapture: “für spätjüdisches Denken können nur solche historische Personen eine eschatologische Sonderfunktion erhalten, die auf dem Wege der leiblichen Entrückung in die himmlische Welt eingegangen sind”.⁹⁷ Although this is surely an overstatement (think, e.g., of the Moses traditions), Haufe was at least right in seeing a strong connection in the Jewish mind between rapture and eschatology. Early Jewish rapture thinking opens up, so to speak, an eschatological scenario.

One cannot ignore the strong points of correspondence between the ascension story and the early Jewish rapture-preservation traditions. Luke

Press, 1976); W.L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47A; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1991) 155–157, 172–173 (lit.); F. Manzi, *Melchisedek e l’angelologia nell’Epistola agli Ebrei e a Qumran* (AnBib 136; Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1997).

⁹⁵ I have discussed 1 Enoch 70–71 (Enoch and the Son of Man) in Zwiep, *Ascension* 51–57. The debate on the identification of Enoch with the Son of Man is still continuing, see recently D.C. Olson, “Enoch and the Son of Man in the Epilogue of the Parables”, *JSPE* 18 (1998) 27–38.

⁹⁶ G. Haufe, “Entrückung und eschatologische Funktion im Spätjudentum”, *ZRGG* 13 (1961) 105–113, quotation from p.105.

⁹⁷ Haufe, “Entrückung” 105.

himself clearly puts us on this track. The terms he uses to describe the ascension immediately call to mind Elijah's spectacular ascent into heaven (cf. 2 Kings 2 LXX; 1 Macc 2:58; Sir 48:9–12 with Lk 9:51; Acts 1:2, 9–11).⁹⁸ The very first reference to Jesus' ascension in Luke-Acts (Lk 9:51 *red.*) is a verbal echo of the opening words of the Elijah story: ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ συμπληροῦσθαι τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ἀναλήμψεως αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὸς τὸ πρόσωπον ἐστήρισεν τοῦ πορεύεσθαι εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ ... (cf. 2 Kings 2:1 LXX).⁹⁹ As far as I know there is no rapture text outside the Jewish or Christian realm in which ἀνάλημψις or ἀναλαμβάνομαι is used to describe an ascension.¹⁰⁰

In addition to the use of common terms, the narrative pattern of Luke-Acts closely resembles the early Jewish rapture tradition. The rapture-ascension is announced in advance by the author [= ADV] in the key verse Luke 9:51, that [345] is, strategically in the middle of the book, anticipating the double narrative at the end of the first and the beginning of the second book. The actual description is found in Luke 24:51 and Acts 1:9–10 [= RAP], where free use is made of conventional rapture terminology and themes. The ascension is preceded by a period of final instructions from the departing Jesus (Lk 24:36–49), according to Acts 1:3 a period of forty days [= INS], a period of equal length as in Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch.¹⁰¹ The ascension initiates a period of physical absence, in which Jesus is being preserved in heaven (Acts 3:20) [= PRS], until his eschatological return (Acts 1:11 *et passim*) [= ESCH].

8. Luke-Acts and the Resurrection and Exaltation Kerygma

If the outline offered above provides the proper context of understanding of the Lukan ascension story, how does all this bear on the question how Luke perceives the exaltation of Jesus? Apart from the necessary physical transformation to fit the heavenly conditions, the raptured saints are not being “deified”. In none of the cases of rapture we find a statement about an enthronement act, let alone an affirmation of divinization or deification.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Cf. T.L. Brodie, “The Departure for Jerusalem (Luke 9,51–56) as a Rhetorical Imitation of Elijah's Departure for the Jordan (2 Kgs 1,1–2,6)”, *Bib.* 70 (1989) 96–109.

⁹⁹ On the problematic grammar of this verse, see A.D. Baum, *Lukas als Historiker der letzten Jesusreise* (TVGMS 379; Wuppertal, Zurich: Brockhaus, 1993) 350–359, and Zwiep, *Ascension* 80–86.

¹⁰⁰ Zwiep, *Ascension* 81ff. Cf. J.H. Moulton, G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, [1930] repr. 1997) 35: “The Biblical use of ‘take up’ for an ascension into heaven is naturally [*sic*] not paralleled in our sources”.

¹⁰¹ To avoid possible misunderstanding: I do not claim literary dependency one way or another. The biblical number 40 was conventional enough to be applied to a variety of circumstances.

¹⁰² That is, not in the sources up to the first century C.E. In later periods some mystical

This would be appalling to the Jewish-Christian mind. But what about being “exalted”? It seems to me that it is inappropriate to say that they are “exalted” in the technical sense of the word. *If* an exaltation (enthronement or installation into an office) is in view, this is an eschatological one. The rapture or ascension is then only a means to postpone the actual exaltation. The ascension puts them, as it were, temporarily on a heavenly sidetrack, waiting for the great eschatological events to come. But the primitive resurrection-exaltation kerygma is concerned with Jesus’ *present* state of exaltation (“this Jesus ... God has exalted”).

The idea that Luke separates exaltation from resurrection and transposes the exaltation of Jesus to the ascension forty days later cannot be sustained from the evidence. This is especially clear if one compares Luke’s description with other exaltation texts (including his own) and notices what he does *not* say. In Luke’s description of the ascension typical exaltation imagery and motifs are lacking. Contrary to “Mark” 16:19 and patristic sources,¹⁰³ Luke [346] does *not* add a reference to the exaltation text *par excellence*, Psalm 110:1, to interpret the event. In marked distinction from many church fathers, there is no mention of Daniel 7:13–14.¹⁰⁴ In contrast with Ephesians 4:8–10 and patristic authors, Psalm 68:19 does not play a role in Luke’s story. The cloud (Acts 1:10), an otherwise apt motif in a theophany and exaltation setting, clearly prevents the disciples to see what they earlier had seen on the Mount of Transfiguration: a spectacular manifestation of Jesus’ future glory, or from what Stephen later on would experience: an immediate view into the glorious presence of God, where he saw Jesus ἐστῶτα ἐκ δεξιῶν τοῦ θεοῦ (Acts 7:55–56). A literary comparison of the three texts in question is very instructive:

Luke 9:32				εἶδον τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ
Acts 1:10	ὡς	ἀτενίζοντες ἦσαν	εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν	[
Acts 7:55		ἀτενίσας	εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν	εἶδεν δόξαν θεοῦ κτλ.]

In the light of all the possibilities that Luke had at his disposal to create a telling exaltation scenery, the absence of exaltation imagery in the ascen-

Jewish groups are dangerously near to this conceptualization (e.g. the Metatron speculations). But one can ask how representative of “mainstream Judaism” these are.

¹⁰³ For the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the ascension motif in the early church, see J.G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven. A Study in the History of Doctrine* (BaL 1958; London: Lutterworth, 1958); D.B. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia. On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

¹⁰⁴ The cloud motif alone does not suffice, since this is a standard rapture motif and occurs in a variety of other contexts in the biblical tradition as well. On the cloud motif in the biblical writings, see J. Luzarraga, *Las Tradiciones de la Nube en la Biblia y en el judaísmo primitivo* (AnBib 54; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1973); L. Sabourin, “The Biblical Cloud. Terminology and Traditions”, *BTB* 4 (1974) 290–311.

sion story is suggestive! It demands at least an explanation. My explanation is a simple one: Luke does not intend to portray the ascension as an exaltation at all. If Luke “knew his classics” (I mean the primitive resurrection and exaltation kerygma), there is nothing surprising in it of course, since that role was reserved for the resurrection-exaltation complex (the Easter event).

At this point I can hardly resist the temptation to bring in another *argumentum e silentio*: what is often overlooked is that the words of the angelic interpreters are most appropriate to the occasion seen from the Jewish rapture perspective: they connect Jesus’ rapture/ascension with his eschatological *return* (“this Jesus ... will come in the same way as you saw him going”), not with his present position in heaven as the Exalted One (“this Jesus ... God has exalted”), as in the kerygmatic sections in the missionary speeches of Acts.

If Luke situates the exaltation in connection with the resurrection rather than with the ascension, what does this mean for our understanding of the Lukan post-Easter appearances? And how does the ascension and exaltation terminology of Acts 2:32ff. fit in?

First, that the resurrection appearances recorded by Luke are not understood as “appearances of the already exalted Lord from heaven” has to do with a failure to appreciate the literary form (*Gattung*) in which they are modelled. John E. Alsup has classified the appearance to the two men on the road to Emmaus and the appearance to the disciples as “anthropomorphic theophany [347] stories” as we find them in the Old Testament and early Jewish sources (Gen 18; Ex 3f.; Jdg 6:13; 1 Sam 3; Tob 5 and 12; Testament of Abraham).¹⁰⁵ This form describes the appearance of a heavenly being in a human mode of being.¹⁰⁶ It is distinguished from the more spectacular manifestations of the heavenly world, such as we find them e.g. in Exodus 19:17–20. The anthropomorphic nature of the appearances would explain the modesty with which Luke describes them. This, I think, may have something to do with Luke’s “anti-Gnostic tendency”¹⁰⁷ or at least with his obvious concern to stress the corporeal nature of the Easter appearances: he

¹⁰⁵ J.E. Alsup, *The Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories of the Gospel Tradition. A History-of-Tradition Analysis With Text-Synopsis* (CThM 5; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1975).

¹⁰⁶ Though from a different angle, Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts* 62–63, is in agreement with Alsup’s conclusion: “his [Alsup’s] use of the expression ‘anthropomorphic theophany’ can be taken as synonymous [with ‘angelophany’]”.

¹⁰⁷ The term should of course be taken *multo cum grano salis*, since Luke does not seem to be opposing a full-blown Gnostic system. Cf. C.K. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (London: Epworth, 1961) 62–64; C.H. Talbert, *Luke and the Gnostics. An Examination of the Lukan Purpose* (Nashville, Tenn., New York: Abingdon, 1966); idem, “An Anti-Gnostic Tendency in Lucan Christology”, *NTS* 14 (1968) 259–271. See now also B. Shellard, *New Light on Luke. Its Purpose, Sources and Literary Context* (JSNT.S 215; London, New York: Sheffield Academic, 2002) 282–288.

does not want to give the impression that the resurrection of Jesus was only a spiritual matter: Jesus is risen *σωματικῶς*, with a body of flesh and bones (Lk 24:39–42). This emphasis reflects a well-known Lukan tendency.

Second, with regard to Acts 2:32–36. A number of scholars take τῆ δεξιᾷ οὖν τοῦ θεοῦ ὑψωθείς (v. 33) and ἀνέβη εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς (v. 34) as immediate backward references to the occasion described in Acts 1:9ff.¹⁰⁸ If this were correct, we would have a clear indication that Luke understood the ascension as an act of exaltation or that he failed to integrate a conflicting source. However, these conclusions would be premature. First, if Luke wished to refer back to Acts 1, it is at least remarkable that he does not use the ascension terminology of Acts 1, as he did in fact in his allusion to Acts 1 in Luke 9:51. He says (in v. 33) οὐ γὰρ Δαυὶδ ἀνέβη εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς (which implicates of course that Jesus did!), rather than οὐ γὰρ Δαυὶδ ἀνελήμφθη εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν. Why does he not make the connection more explicit? Second, it is pertinent to classify this “ascension text” to its proper form or genre. I have argued elsewhere in detail that Acts 2:32–36 does not belong to the “rapture” type of ascension, but to the heavenly journey type, which describes Christ’s victory with the help of the language of ascent of Psalm 68, as in Ephesians 4:8–10.¹⁰⁹ In my view the rapture category would be inappropriate to the line of argument (rapture implies a “subordinationist Christology”), whereas the issue in Acts 2:33f. is that Jesus pours out the Spirit by virtue of [348] his exaltation. The language of these verses, moreover, is clearly not Luke’s but stems from tradition. As I observed earlier, there is nothing irregular in employing ascension language to interpret the *resurrection* event. Acts 2:32–36 is a theological statement of the resurrection-exaltation kerygma, in line with the early apostolic preaching (*as well as* with Luke’s own point of view), rather than a backward reference to the ascension event in Acts 1:9ff. The text can be satisfactorily explained without recourse to Luke’s assumed careless handling of sources.

9. Final Remarks and Conclusions

First, the Lukan ascension story is not a narrative description of the *exaltatio ad dexteram Dei*, but a description of the last post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. The crux of the story, however, lies not in the isolated event as such, but in the larger context of which it is a part. From a literary-theological perspective, the ascension is a linking device connecting various components of the Jesus event with its aftermath. Above all, the bibli-

¹⁰⁸ E.g. Weiser, “Himmelfahrt” 333: “Act 2,33; 5,31 wird mit der Erhöhungsaussage (ὑψοῦν) (...) auf der Ebene der lukanischen Redaktion an die sichtbare Himmelfahrt gedacht sein”. More authors are instanced in Zwiep, *Ascension* 154 n.1.

¹⁰⁹ Zwiep, *Ascension* 153–157.

cal Elijah tradition provided the necessary ingredients for structuring the events that surrounded the end of Jesus' earthly career and the beginning of the early Christian community. The rapture terminology, the link between rapture and parousia, the nexus between rapture and the outpouring of the Spirit upon the successors, etc. are all reminiscent of and inspired by the biblical Elijah tradition.

Second, a proper application of form-critical categories helps to understand how Luke can apply ascension terminology at the same time to both resurrection and ascension contexts. In line with early Christian tradition, Luke interprets the resurrection in terms of a heavenly exaltation (e.g. Acts 2:32ff.), but he reserves the rapture category *exclusively* to picture the final leave-taking of Jesus.

Third, in a first-century Jewish context the rapture phenomenon has a different function than in a Graeco-Roman setting. Rather than dramatising an act of enthronement or apotheosis, Jewish rapture candidates are kept in preservation to fulfil some task in the end time.

Fourth, the message of the ascension story has somehow to do with the eschatological expectations of the post-70 era. Jewish rapture speculations flourished especially in roughly the same period in which Luke composed his two-volume work, that is, somewhere in the last three decades of the first century C.E.¹¹⁰ A tentative explanation is that the fall of Jerusalem and the [349] destruction of the temple – of old signs of the end! – had created a tense atmosphere in which apocalyptic speculations would find a fertile soil. As time passed by the problem of a delayed parousia would become increasingly urgent. The seriousness of the “eschatological crisis” may be a matter of debate, but that in the final decades of the first century some such crisis has occurred, I see no reason to doubt. With the help of the Jewish rapture traditions Luke was able to maintain the tension between imminent expectation and ongoing history. As much as Enoch, Elijah and the others had not yet returned, so Jesus would remain in heaven until the appointed time, however long that would turn out to be. The firm belief that the raptured saints of Israel's past in the end would return from their heavenly abode to make *acte de présence* in the eschatological events provided Luke with a “biblical” paradigm to pass on the same message about Jesus in a time the imminent expectancy of the End and the Son of Man's spectacular parousia

¹¹⁰ In a post-70 setting at least. For the date of (Luke-)Acts, see F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles. Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Apollos, 1951, ³1990) 9–18: “If ... a date in the late 70s or early 80s of the first century (say, in the principate of Titus or early in that of Domitian) is assigned to Acts, most of the evidence will be satisfied”; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AncB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 51–55; C.K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles 2. Introduction and Commentary on Acts XV–XXVIII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) xxxiii–lxii.

“on the clouds of heaven” had become increasingly problematic: οὗτος ὁ Ἰησοῦς ... οὕτως ἐλεύσεται ὁν τρόπον ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, “This Jesus ... *will* come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:12 NRSV).

Postscript

Although this is not the place to interact in full detail with responses to my work on *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology*, it may not be inappropriate here to make a few comments on a recent monograph on the Lukan ascension narratives, written by Matthew Sleeman, since he expressly interacts with my work.¹¹¹ This is the revised version of a PhD thesis supervised by Richard Burridge and awarded by the University of London (2007).

Since Mikeal Parsons published his narrative analysis of the ascension texts in 1987,¹¹² no comprehensive literary-critical study has been undertaken to outline the narrative implications of the ascension theme in the overall setting of Acts. My own studies focussed on exegetical, form-critical and biblical-theological issues, the work of Douglas Farrow on dogmatic issues.¹¹³ According to Sleeman, studies on Acts that have appeared since have not sufficiently taken into account Jesus’ ascended status as determinative for the program of Acts *in toto*, implying that the viewpoint of Acts cannot be labelled as an “absentee Christology”. This dissertation, then, fills a significant gap in present-day Acts scholarship and one that deserves much credit.

Although the author develops his argument in partial contrast with my own line of interpretation, I think Dr Sleeman has made a plausible and convincing case for the present activity of the heavenly Jesus in the plot development of Acts. Our differences lie in the estimation of the nature of the ascension as such – does the ascension close a period of appearances and introduce a period of absence or is it a scenery that exalts Jesus into heaven? – and in the role of temporality in Luke’s perception, but given the absence of scholarly consensus on these matters, these differences are

¹¹¹ M. Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* (MSSNTS 146; Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹² M.C. Parsons, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts. The Ascension Narratives in Context* (JSNT.S 21; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987).

¹¹³ D.B. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia. On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). A helpful survey of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Lukan ascension narratives is given by F. Bovon, *L’Évangile selon saint Luc (19,28–24,53)* (CNT III; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2009) 490–498.

of course legitimate. The critique to be expected on Sleeman's almost exclusive focus on *spatiality* (reading for space) is that he ignores or pushes aside the problem of *temporality* in Acts (reading for time). The focus on spatiality admittedly provides a coherent and plausible interpretation of the active role of the heavenly Jesus in Acts, but at what cost? In my work I have stressed the role of the ascension as a definitive departure of Jesus that inaugurates a period (not of inactivity but) of absence. From the perspective of form criticism, the whole point of an ascension / rapture story (*Entrückungserzählung*) is that the person taken up into heaven is no longer present on earth (Enoch, Elijah, etc.). This, of course, has repercussions on how one understands Luke's position vis-à-vis the delay of the Parousia and the question of imminent expectation (*Naherwartung*). What are the implications of Dr Sleeman's focus on space for Luke's understanding of time, specifically his understanding of the Parousia? Does the fact that Jesus is no longer physically present on earth have no implications at all for the believing community in Acts? Does space replace time? What is the narrative function of the special period (!) of the forty days of post-resurrection appearances?

In response to Dr Sleeman's criticism on my claim that Luke's rapture Christology almost automatically implies an "absentee Christology",¹¹⁴ I for my part do not think that the case for the present activity of Jesus should rest on the (act of) ascension as such (in my view a more careful definition of terms is needed), but on the ascended and *exalted status* of the risen Lord *by virtue of the resurrection-exaltation*. The notion of space plays its part already from day one, so to speak. In Luke-Acts as a whole it is sufficiently clear that Luke counterbalances the risk of an absentee Christology by his firm conviction that Jesus is now "at the right hand of the Father" (i.e. in a position of authority) and from there exercises his power over history in various ways (and, I would add, in a way qualitatively different from his appearances during the forty days). To Luke, *Jesus is absent but not inactive*. That most of the divine interventions in Acts are christological has been persuasively argued by Sleeman.

Dr Sleeman's interpretation of Paul's Damascus Road Experience¹¹⁵ is open to criticism, insofar as Luke seems to make a clear qualitative distinction between the (visionary) experience of Paul and the post-resurrection appearances to the apostolic witnesses – he calls Paul's experience a "heavenly vision", (οὐρανόσχημος ὄρασις, Acts 26:19), that is, an event of a different

¹¹⁴ Sleeman, *Geography* 15–17. See Zwiep, *Ascension* 182, following C.F.D. Moule, "The Christology of Acts", in: L.E. Keck, J.L. Martyn (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts. Essays Presented in Honor of Paul Schubert* (London: SPCK, 1966; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 179–180; G.W. MacRae, "'Whom Heaven Must Receive Until the Time'. Reflections on the Christology of Acts", *Interp.* 27 (1973) 151–165.

¹¹⁵ Sleeman, *Geography* 16, 197–217.

order than the apostolic Christophanies of Acts 1, even though it is the same Lord who appears.¹¹⁶ These, however, are only points of minor criticism of an otherwise excellent and careful exposition of the theme of Jesus' activity in the remainder of Acts. Future scholarship cannot and should not ignore this important and creative contribution to our understanding of the theology of Acts.

¹¹⁶ See A.W. Zwiep, *Judas and the Choice of Matthias. A Study on Context and Concern of Acts 1:15-26* (WUNT 2. Reihe 187; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 179–180, and further Chapter 8 of the present work.