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Ascension of Jesus: Drawing from the thoughts of Andries van Aarde

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This article stems from the author's dialogue with New Testament scholar Andries van Aarde about the divinity of Jesus, during which the topic of Jesus' ascension also arose. The author aims to focus on Van Aarde's thinking about the ascension of Jesus. The article does not intend to provide a reflection on the exegetical and hermeneutical analysis of the biblical texts alluding to the ascension of Jesus Christ. Instead, it argues that these texts existentially emphasise a believer's new life, theologically expressed as 'personal ascension', implying participation with God. In the New Testament, language expressing Jesus' ascension was borrowed particularly from royal psalms in the Old Testament. The concept of 'ascent to heaven' to access the divine presence is central not only to Jewish Christian apocalyptic symbolism but it also became part of the church's liturgy. Van Aarde contends that the modern church should preserve the reference to Jesus' ascension in ecclesial confessional language, despite no longer affirming a three-tiered universe or adhering to the mythical language of 'descended into hell' and 'ascended to heaven'.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article makes the case that Jesus Christ's ascension serves as a liturgical celebration of victory over trauma. It demonstrates the need for a metaphorical interpretation of the ancient references to ascension. These mythological descriptions become anachronistic in our time if they are interpreted in a realistic, historical and literal sense. However, rich and meaningful victory poetry can still be communicated if the 'ascension' is interpreted metaphorically.

Keywords: ascension; Andries van Aarde; Ecclesial liturgy; Jesus Christ; metaphorical language; Reformational Creeds.

Introduction

This article is the result of a recent article in which I supportively responded to a New Testament colleague – in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University – Peter Nagel's[1] article: *Problematising the divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus is not θεός* (*Stellenbosch Theological Journal* – STJ). This specific article drew, among others, on the thoughts of Andries van Aarde (1951–)[2] and Bernhard Lohse (1928–1997),[3] on Jesus' degree of divinity and the history of the doctrine of the Trinity, respectively (Chris Jones 2024). From my conversations with Van Aarde about how we should understand the divinity of Jesus, the ascension of Jesus also came up. Hence, the decision to reflect on the latter as it emerged over years in Van Aarde's thinking and work.

The article aims to affirm Van Aarde's view that the statements in the Reformational creeds regarding Jesus' ascension do not correspond to actual historical facts. Instead, the proposition about the ascension of Jesus Christ in the Nicene Creed (325 CE) represents an evolutionary historical development, from the Apostles' Creed to the Nicene Creed to the First Council of Constantinople (381 CE), coinciding with the resurrection of Jesus to the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (interpreted as one event – see later) and obtains an existential significance

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for Christians today. The article does not intend to provide a reflection on the exegetical and hermeneutical analysis of all biblical texts alluding to the ascension of Jesus Christ, as numerous studies have already conducted this historical-critical analysis.

The article demythologises the emphasis and existential meaning of the confessional remark in the Epistle of Barnabas 15 (see James Paget 2007:72–80), which asserts that both the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ are believed to have occurred on a Sunday. This day symbolises life, referred to as the 'day of the resurrection' (cf. Aubrey W. Argyle 1955:240). Justin Martyr is more explicit and considers 'resurrection' and 'ascension' as one event (Enslin 1928:69). Although other patristic theologians (e.g. Clement of Rome, Polycarp, unknown authors of Hermas and Didache) ignore (or rejected) the ascension, seemingly because they rejected any tradition that is separated from the resurrection (Schmiedel 1903, col. 4061; cf. Enslin 1928:69). Present-day influential theologians, such as Karl Barth, are much more in compliance with Justin Martyr.

In his book *Karl Barth and the resurrection of the flesh: The loss of the body in participatory eschatology*, Nathan Hitchcock (2013:24) argues that the dialectic of resurrection and ascension aligns with Karl Barth's dogmatics, where a believer participates in both Jesus Christ's resurrection and ascension. Hitchcock (2013:24) articulates it as follows: 'New life in Christ is fundamentally an ascension beyond fleshly identity'. Barth describes Jesus' life, now risen and ascended, as omnipresent, with access to all times (Hitchcock 2013:88). Hitchcock (2013:91) concludes, 'Accordingly, if I may state assertively, Barth has given us a doctrine of personal ascension, not bodily resurrection'.

Van Aarde's view on the ascension of Jesus Christ also emphasises that, although resurrection–ascension are not actual historical facts, they existentially emphasise the believer's new life, theologically expressed as 'personal ascension'.

Prelude

In May 2012, Van Aarde wrote an article in *Die Hervormer*, the official newspaper of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa, titled: *The ascension of Jesus and his royal crown*.[4]

He begins this article by referencing the following sections of the Apostles' Creed, known as the 'Twelve Articles of Faith' (*Symbolum Apostolicum* [circa 2 CE] 2005), and incorporating the corresponding biblical *loci classici*:

> I believe in … Jesus Christ [Luke 2:11; John 20:28] … Suffered under Pontius Pilate [Luke 23:24]; was crucified [John 19:20; Acts 4:10], killed [1 Cor. 15:3] and buried [1 Cor. 15:4]: He descended into hell [Acts 2:24, i.e. the grave] … The third day he rose again from the dead [1 Cor. 15:4] … He ascended into heaven [Luke 24:51; Acts 1:11] and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. [Mk 16:19; Heb 1:3; 10:12]

In one of its hymns (*Liedboek* #388 2001a), the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa, to which Van Aarde belongs, sings about the message of Jesus' birth and his humiliation in a tone that reflects wrestling and questioning: 'Who would have expected him like this, without a royal crown?'.[5] The final words of the last verse of this song provide guidance on how to answer the question (*Liedboek* #388.3 2001a)[6]: 'We bow in thanks, O Lord, even though we cannot understand that Jesus wanted to go on such a path for sinners'.[7] Another church song echoes this answer to the wrestling question with a hallelujah (*Liedboek* #417.2 2001b): 'Jesus, we honour you, risen Lord, Prince of Life and King, you have triumphed. Because you have overcome, we will triumph'.[8] Indeed, this is what is affirmed in the fourth and fifth confessions of the Symbolum Apostolicum ([ca 2 CE] 2005): 'We believe in Jesus Christ ... who ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Almighty Father'.

Jesus' birth, suffering, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and return ('second coming') are not presented in the Symbolum Apostolicum (Apostles' Creed) as sequential episodes (events) in a literal biography of Jesus of Nazareth. This second-century confessional writing is not a biography. These confessions of faith about Jesus Christ testify to the one saving act of God, which grants people faith and participation with the divine, with Jesus as the forerunner of faith. God's redeeming act shows how much God loves the world and vulnerable human beings. In weakness lies strength. In humiliation lies exaltation. In the oldest Gospel, that of Mark, Jesus says on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem where the cross awaits: '… and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' (Mt 16:25[9]). Believing such a contradictory message as the gospel, as good news, is possible only through grace. Following Jesus on the *via dolorosa* entails a compassionate willingness to remain connected to Jesus' path and his gospel.

Crucifixion and ascension – Death and omnipresence

The first reformers (e.g. Martin Luther and Calvin) wanted to know if it would not have been enough for the church to end the testimony about Jesus' suffering with his 'being buried'. The fact that there was not an honourable family burial for Jesus – is this not the climax of humiliation? Seen in this way, the confession that Jesus was buried concludes the proclamation about the way of suffering or *via dolorosa*.

4.In Afrikaans, 'Die hemelvaart van Jesus en sy koningskroon' ('The ascension of Jesus and his royal crown'), *Die Hervormer*, Mei 2012, Die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika.

5.*Liedboek* #388 'Wie sou hom só verwag het, só sonder koningskroon?' ['Who would have expected him like this, without a king's crown?' (my translation')].

6.*Liedboek* #388.3 'Die Woord het deur die eeue', in *Liedboek van die Kerk vir gebruik by die erediens en ander byeenkomste* 2001, NG Kerk-Uitgewers, Kaapstad (Original text: Gerjo van der Merwe, 1978).

7.*Liedboek* #388.3 'Ons buig in dank, o Here, al kan ons nie verstaan dat Jesus vir die sondaars op só 'n pad wou gaan' ['We bow in gratitude, oh Lord, even though we cannot understand that Jesus wanted to walk such a path for sinners' (my translation)].'

8.*Liedboek* #417, 'Jesus, ons eer u, opgestane Heer, Lewensvors en Koning, u het triomfeer. Omdat U oorwin het, sal ons triomfeer' ['Jesus, we honour you, risen Lord, Prince of Life and King, You have triumphed. Because you have overcome, we shall triumph' (my translation).]

9.The Holy Bible – Revised Standard Version [1946] [1952] 1971 (the included Apocrypha is copyrighted 1957, 1977), The Division of Christian Education, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

The dying body becomes the decomposing body. What might be left of respectability languishes in the grave. A funeral is the last opportunity to pay one's last respects to somebody. Could it not be satisfactory for our faith in and imitation of Jesus Christ to suffice with the confession about Jesus' burial? No, if 'dying with Christ' is not supplemented with 'living with Christ', existential belief will be quite inadequate. If we end our confession regarding the significance of Christ's person and work with the death of Jesus, we end at most with the atonement and miss the omnipresence of Christ. Furthermore, because Christ was raised to the Father's right hand, he could not be physically present elsewhere. Luther replied that Christ's resurrection and ascension do not imply a physical presence at the right hand of God (Matthieu Arnold 2014). According to Luther, ascension represents authentic communication of the 'perfect act of redemption once for all accomplished in Christ's previous existence and glory' (Neil Anthony 2019:251).

Although resurrection and ascension imply a physical reality (Luther), Christian belief needs the confession of both resurrection and ascension to emphasise divine omnipresence and the believer's present living with God and participation in Christ who sits on the right hand of God. After all, to drink the cup of suffering such as Jesus and to be baptised with the baptism with which Jesus was baptised (Mk 10:38–39) was the martyr's fate of the disciple James, one of the two sons of Zebedee. In his own way, Paul says that Christ's followers are expected to be 'baptized into the death of Jesus' and to be 'buried with Jesus' (Rm 6:3–4), but also to be 'resurrected with Jesus' (Rm 6:4).[10] Therefore, our confessions about Jesus Christ proclaim the one redemptive act of God from different perspectives and facets, like a reflecting diamond. For John Calvin (1541:297), much like Martin Luther's view on the existential significance of the believer's 'personal ascension' (see Neil Anthony on Luther and Hitchcock on Karl Barth), it was important that the confession of Jesus being buried was expanded to include 'descended into hell' and 'ascended to heaven'. Descending is the lowest, the deepest, recognition that God redeems us in and through Jesus Christ, even when we experience our lostness as a finality in despair. Even in despair, God's saving hand remains stretched out to us. Calvin helps us understand our confession that there is nothing that can be such a hell that we will not be able to be picked up by God, the Almighty Father.

> The assurance of Christ's perpetual presence, vouched until the world's end, found realisation in his ascension. As his body soared above celestial realms, his authority surged beyond earthly confines. In tandem with his ascension, he assumed his *rightful place at the Father's right hand* …. This *metaphor* mirrors the practice of monarchs appointing deputies to govern on their behalf. Christ, elevated to a position of authority, operates as the Father's partner in overseeing creation. This term illuminates his ordination as Lord over heaven and earth, formalising his sovereignty and dominion. (paraphrase of John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion* 1541 French edition, p. 297; my italics)

10.ἵνα ***ὥσπερ ἠγέρθη Χριστὸς ἐκ νεκρῶν*** διὰ τῆς δόξης τοῦ Πατρός, οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς περιπατήσωμεν (Rm 6:4) = 'just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life' (*The New International Version* [NIV], edited by Kenneth L. Barker ([1973] [1991] 2011).

Our confession about Jesus' ascension, according to Van Aarde, therefore, does not want to focus our attention on a geographical constellation of hell below and heaven above the earth. It is rather a confession of a believing sinner who accepts our exaltation by God from the deepest misery, and who believes that God saves. That is why Luther (see Anthony 2010; Arnold 2014) and Calvin (1541:297) say that the descent is the first phase of our exaltation to be with Christ. No longer without a royal crown, but with one.

Ascension and a three-tier worldview

Religious systems with a geocentric worldview, envisioning a three-tier universe with hell below and heaven above, use specific terminology to describe incarnation ('movement from heaven to earth') and ascension ('movement from earth to heaven') (Elaine Jones 2021:156). This language employs mythological terms to convey symbolic meanings (cf. Perry 1959:41). Segal (1980:1350) supports this perspective by citing examples from the 'Old Kingdom' of ancient Egypt and the foundation legends of ancient Rome. The Pyramid Texts (ca. 2348–2205 BCE), inscribed on the walls of five royal pyramids at Saqqara in Egypt, are considered the oldest extensive written material in the world (Wim van den Dungen ([2005] 2019). These texts include dramas, hymns, litanies, glorifications, magical texts, offering rituals, prayers, charms, divine offerings, the ascension of Pharaoh, the arrival of Pharaoh in heaven and Pharaoh's settlement in heaven (Van Dungen 2019b). The Pyramid Texts are considered as the oldest body of theology in the world.

Within this three-tier religious system, ascension was integral to Egyptian spirituality for more than three millennia, influencing every culture it encountered (Van Dungen 2019a). According to Jan Assmann (2002:134) the 'ascension myth, which is highly prominent in the Pyramid Texts, has its counterpart in the descensus myth'. Regarding the ascension myth in ancient Egyptian spiritual beliefs, Jan Assmann highlights the 'father-son constellation', a concept deeply rooted in their culture. He explains that this relationship, with the father in the afterlife and the son in the living world, is central to their funerary practices. The belief holds that only a son can connect with his deceased father, creating a mutually supportive and life-giving bond that transcends death. This concept is encapsulated in the Egyptian word 'akh', illustrated by the common saying: 'Akh is a father for his son, akh is a son for his father' (Assmann 2002:130). One pyramid scene portrays the Pharaoh, depicted as the divine king, ascending on the smoke of incense: 'they made a ladder for N[un] that he might ascend to heaven on it' (Samuel Mercer [1952] 2020). The Pharaoh is shown flying like a bird and landing as a beetle (Van Dungen 2019a:313). This symbolic imagery and metaphors were used to describe the divine king's ascent to his divine father, the sole creator-god (Van Dungen 2019a:365; cf. Elaine Jones 2021:156). Elaine Jones (2021:156–157) also refers to Utnapishtim in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (the equivalent of the biblical Noah) and the corresponding Babylonian myth regarding Xisuthros, 'who was not subjected to death but was assumed to heaven'.

Another example from the Old Testament is Enoch (Gn 5:24), whose account is based on the legend of Emmeduranki, found in a 'ritual tablet discovered in the library of Ashurbanipal' (Elaine Jones 2021:157). According to Segal (1980:1359), there are 'similarities between this Mesopotamian myth and the ascension of Jesus'. This leads us into the Graeco-Roman era.

Ascension legends of heroic figures, emperors, and godlike humans (οἱ θεάνθρωποι)[11] are common in Graeco-Roman literature. Examples include among others Hercules, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Claudius[12] – and Jesus of Nazareth. In his book, *The rise of Rome: The making of the world's greatest empire*, Anthony Everitt (2012) highlights a remarkable completion of a circle between Romulus and Julius Caesar, from the inception of Rome as a 'polis-state' leading to a Republic, to the beginning of the Roman Empire: 'Like Romulus, he [Julius Caesar] has ascended into heaven and joined the company of the gods. In Rome's [Republic] end was its [Empire] beginning' (Everitt 2012:25). In the monumental work *Ab urbe condita* ('From the founding of the city'), Livy (59 BCE – CE 17), a Roman historian, documented Rome's history from its legendary origins before the traditional founding in 753 BCE, to the era of Augustus, covering Livy's contemporary times. Regarding Romulus (772 BCE), Livy in his *Ab urbe condita*[13] (1.16), notes that the inhabitants of Rome 'joyfully declared Romulus, the king and father of the city of Rome, to be a god, the son of a god' (Elaine Jones 2021:156). According to legend, Romulus, the first king and founder of Rome, ascended to heavens and is thus celebrated and deified.

The concept of 'ascent to heaven' to access the divine presence is central to the terminology of 'Jewish Christian apocalyptic symbolism' (Elaine Jones 2021:157). An example is *The Ascension of Isaiah* 7:1–2, dated to the late first century CE (Rowland 1982:386). Another example is the ascension of Jesus in Lukan theology, narrated in Luke (24:51) and Acts (1:2, 9–11, 22) (see *inter alia* McCabe 2014:79–100; O'Toole 1979:106–114; Rosen 2016:179–206).

The confession that we believe in Jesus Christ who ascended to heaven is not based on modern day's natural science. Its origin in antiquity comes from poetry, and it has especially become part of the liturgy of the church. The later added part 'and sits at the right hand of God the Almighty Father' was understood by influential early church fathers as figurative language. Other church fathers also did not want to understand this confession literally, but spiritually. Nevertheless, metaphorically and/or spiritually, the hymn of praise about Jesus' ascension has ancient roots, particularly borrowed from royal psalms such as Psalm (110:1), Psalm (146:10), and Psalm (8:7), as well as from Old Testament passages such as 1 Chronicles (28:5) and Daniel (7:9–14) (Van Aarde 2012:2–3; cf. Van Aarde 2013:6 of 8, note 28). These texts express divine presence in 'heaven' and royal intercession and protection for subordinates living on 'earth'.

These hymns about the exaltation and crowning of the messianic king are applied to Jesus as the Christ and Lord in several places in the New Testament. One of the oldest and most famous of these we find in Romans (8:31–39 [NIV[14]]). The climax of this passage perfectly and poetically confesses:

> What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – *is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us*. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:
>
> > 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered'.
>
> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor death, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The matter about Jesus' ascension in our confession is our consolation that we belong to Jesus Christ in life and in death. In imagery, we are convinced that Christ pleads our case with God on our behalf. Therefore, defamation and evil will not make us deviate from following in Christ's footsteps. Statements in the Nicene Creed appear in the form of propositions, as explained by Van Aarde (2012). A proposition is a statement that is valid for a large group of people. However, dogmatic propositions do not necessarily express something that individual believers personally experience as their own individual conviction. People can read it in church liturgical manuals, hear liturgists pronounce it in worship services or even sing it as part of the church hymn without experiencing the *matter* expressed by the proposition, as their own faith, intrinsically and existentially. Confessing together with the church and like the church requires an appropriation of the *matter* expressed in the confession. However, we would like to accept that, far back in the history of the formation of the dogma, the *matter* that is expressed in the confession of the dogma did arise because of religious experiences of believers in interaction with each other.

11.The Greek word 'theánthropos' (Latin: 'deus homo') denotes the idea of the incarnation and the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ. The hypostatic union, coming from the Greek term ὑπόστασις, which means 'person' or 'subsistence', is an essential concept in mainstream Christology. It explains the merging of Christ's human and divine natures into one individual person (one hypostasis) (see Chris Jones 2024:1–23).

12.In Greek mythology, the five principal male gods are generally regarded as Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Apollo, and Hermes. The five foremost female goddesses are identified as Hera, Athena, Artemis, Demeter, and Aphrodite. These deities hold central roles in Greek myths and legends.

13.Titus Livius (59 BCE – CE 17), *Ab urbe condita* ('From the Founding of the City', in Jane Chaplin 2000, *Livy's Exemplary History*; cf. Daniel Smith (2006:56).

14.The New International Version.

Metaphor and confession

Dogmas are therefore confessions of faith expressed in statements. Faith is about the relationship between people and God. Because dogmas express the nature of the relationship between God and people, metaphors are used in confessions. No human being can articulate anything about God's relationship with human beings without using images from the world of human beings. Metaphors are therefore imagery that makes sense to people because it comes from a shared historical context and is an expression of those people's experience of reality (see Chris Jones 2024:1–23). We who recite the Nicene Creed today, however, live in a different time than the fourth century when the assembled bishops agreed on specific religious imagery. This imagery was confirmed by later councils, and it reflects points of contact with other creeds that were drawn up earlier while some metaphors were taken from the Bible. Historically, it is a question of whether the metaphors have always been understood in the same way because the historical contexts from which they have been taken over have changed over several 100 years.

A believer could agree with the exact wording of a dogmatic proposition, if the metaphors contained in it still have the same meaning for the confessor, who now lives in a different time and context, as when the confession originated (see Ricoeur 1974:24–44; Van Aarde 2020b:273). There are metaphors that retain their function over long periods of time and in different cultural contexts. Others' function is lost, modified, or may be preserved, but become socially unacceptable because the cultural context has changed. It is also possible that exegesis can show that the 'doctrine' expressed in the confession does not concur with the gospel. If it affects the core of the church's creed, especially as far as the Protestant church is concerned, the church expects the exegete to inform the church about this in a prescribed manner. When the function of metaphors in dogmas decays, modifies or becomes unacceptable, it does not necessarily mean that the *issue* the dogma articulates, necessarily decays or becomes unacceptable. In confessional interpretation, therefore, the baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater. The exegesis of dogmas can help to find out how the classic confessions can still be experienced meaningfully. Sometimes it will be necessary to use contemporary metaphors.

Before and after Nicaea

The natural sciences teach us about the evolution from ancient cosmology to the modern heliocentric world view. Today's believers live in a world where 'heaven' and 'journeys to heaven' no longer have the same meaning as for people in the world of either the Bible or the fourth century CE when the Nicene Creed was written. Our current knowledge of the planetary systems means that we can no longer think about an 'ascension' in the same way as Paul or Luke or Seneca in the first century CE did. Seneca (*Apocolocyntosis* 13.2, in Van Aarde 2020b:27–28; cf. Paul Eden 1984:139), a famous writer living at the same time as Paul, tells us of the Roman emperor Claudius who, after his death, ascended to heaven above (that is the 'sky'), from where he was pulled back to instead go to 'hell' below (that is Hades). Luke, the Greek author of the 'Gospel of Luke' and the 'Acts of the Apostles', in many ways strongly influenced by Paul, describes how Jesus was taken up in a cloud before the eyes of his disciples and that two men in white clothes (angels?) tell them that Jesus will return to them just as they saw him go to heaven. Paul writes in the letter to the Romans: It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, *who is at the right hand of God*, who indeed 'intercedes for us' (Rm 8:34; *author's own emphasis*). It is this type of religious imagery and metaphoric language that echoes in the church's confession about Jesus' ascension.

The proposition about the ascension of Jesus in the Nicene Creed consists of three statements: Jesus ascended to heaven; Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father; Jesus intercedes for us. The last two connect directly with Paul's statement in Romans (8:34). The first one, the ascension to heaven, also occurs in Paul – although in different words. In Romans (1:3–4), Paul writes that Jesus was crowned Son of God because of his resurrection from the dead. In a sense it is 'ascension language'. Similarly, we find 'ascension language' in Philippians (2:9–11) where Paul creatively quotes a song and says that after the shameful death on the cross God raised Jesus to the highest honour and that all in heaven and on earth acknowledge Jesus as Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Other religious writers were also influenced by Paul, such as the authors of 1 Peter (3:22), Acts (2:32–36; 5:3; 7:55–56) and the Letter to the Colossians who also testify of Jesus who is seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:1). The writer of Ephesians 1, who was not only influenced by Paul, but also used the letter to the Colossians as a basis, says:

> [*W*]hich he [*God*] accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion (v. 20)

Similar 'ascension language' occurs in Matthew (28:18) (cf. Cavins & Christmyer 2009; Enslin 1928:67–68), Revelation (among others 1:5; 5:13) and Hebrews (5:5–10; 7:25). It is especially Acts (2:32–36) that reflects Pauline influence, although the way in which Luke refers to the role of the Holy Spirit in this passage is particularly typical of his own theological thinking.

Romans 8:34 seems, historically speaking, our earliest testimony in the Christian Bible on which the bishops of Nicaea could have based their imagery of Jesus' ascension. This especially relates to the typical language pattern of Jesus who is first sent as a Son by God, descends into death, and is then resurrected by God, *exalted to the right hand of the Father*. Romans (8:34) also has the reference to Jesus' interceding (pleading) for the believers from the exalted position at the right hand of God the Father; however, the Nicene Creed did not take over this aspect. We do find it in the Heidelberg Catechism (Sunday 18) and

by implication in the Belgic Creed (Article 26). The latter links the 'pleading' of Jesus for believers (*intercessio*) to the 'ascension language' found in the letter to the Hebrews (see Nicholas Moore 2020:521–541). One could argue that the subsequent proposition in the Nicene Creed (just like that in the Athanasian Creed) about the second coming and the judgement, includes the *intercessio*. The Heidelberg Catechism, however, does make this direct connection.

Van Aarde (2012) believes that we should not separate the Pauline metaphor of Jesus' exaltation from his sitting down at the Father's right hand, especially not if we ask about the meaning of this religious imagery in the Nicene Creed. The 318 bishops who made up the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE did not initially add the metaphor of the Lord's 'sitting down at the Father's right hand' to the formula about the ascension. In CE 381, 150 bishops gathered in Constantinople to finalise the Nicene Creed and it was reaffirmed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In the later form, the metaphor 'sit down at the right hand of the Father' was added. The other modifications are mainly related to the differences about the essential nature of the relationship between the Son and the Father.

Henry Bettenson, an English classical scholar, noted in his 1967 collection of early church documents that the decisions made at the Council of Nicaea were primarily the work of a minority and were misunderstood and disliked by many who were not followers of Arius. In particular, the terms *ek tes ousias* (meaning [from the essence] of the Father) and *homoousios* (meaning [of the same essence] as the Father) aroused opposition. Critics argued that these terms were unscriptural, novel, tended towards Sabellianism (interpreting *ousia* as particular reality rather than spiritual being), and were metaphysically erroneous. Under the leadership of Athanasius, ninety bishops gathered in Antioch and held a council, proposing the 'Creed of the Dedication' as a substitute for the Nicene Creed, despite, or perhaps because of, a letter from Pope Julius urging Athanasius' restoration after he had been twice exiled (Bettenson 1967:41). It seems to Van Aarde (2012) that the specific Pauline addition was taken from the 'catechetical notes' of Cyril of Jerusalem (313 CE–386 CE). Probably the addition was intended to support the orthodox Nicene doctrine of the two natures of Jesus regarding the understanding of the expression *homousios* (see Geir Hellemo 1989:194).

Paul – The first theologian who confessed the ascension of Jesus Christ and his followers

There is a time difference of more than three 100 years between the (first) Council of Constantinople (381 CE) and Paul's writing to the congregation in Rome (late 56/early 57 CE). In Romans 8:33–34 (NIV) we read:

> Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – *is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us*.

It seems to Van Aarde (2012) that Paul was interested in what it means for believers to have Jesus Christ as Saviour. According to Paul, the finitude of man and creation as well as sin and death is the reality within which people live – and this includes trauma of all kinds. But infinity is actually the essence of existence. The longing for salvation is the search for infinity.[15]

To be redeemed assumes a life that is not controlled by what is human or part of creation, but by God's Spirit. Such a life amounts to a meaningful existence before God (that is, in loving service to God and each other) amid trauma and despite death – in life before death and after death. Paul asks (Rm 7:24–25): 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' Believers are destined to be 'conformed to the image of God's Son'. Paul says: 'You are one with Christ Jesus' (Rm 6:11[16]) and in another place: 'The same mind must be present in you as was in Christ Jesus' (Phlp 2:5[17]).

For Paul, announcing the death of Jesus Christ, his resurrection, his exaltation, his sitting at the right hand of the Father and his plea for believers is an expression of his thanks to God that God through Jesus Christ our Lord has redeemed believers from their mortal existence. The Old Testament provided Paul with the background in terms of which he used his imagery in his version of the 'ascension story'. Psalm 110 speaks of a *messianic king who will sit at God's right hand* to demonstrate the subjugation of hostile forces. Daniel 7 speaks of a figure such as a person who appears on the clouds and controls everything with divine authority in order to offer victory to the suffering people of God. We have seen that Paul's version of 'personal ascension' shares the imagery found in literature and artwork in the Eastern Mediterranean. In Egypt, we find replicas from the Pharaoh's world where statues of the Pharaoh and his son (or wife) are depicted on his right hand (cf. Van Aarde 2020a:47). This position of honour shows that the son (or queen) received the highest honour. In the Greco-Roman world, we read in tragedies or satires of the exaltation or descent of dead emperors (Van Aarde 2020b:27–28).

For Paul, Christ Jesus is the Savior who after his death was raised with divine authority and placed with dominion over all hostile powers. These forces are called our 'mortality', our 'sin', our 'death'. In metaphorical language, it is described how Jesus Christ overcame these powers, now intercedes for us, and pleads with God on behalf of believers.

The essence of Van Aarde's (2023) religiosity is the:

> [*E*]xperience that the divine eternity [*pneuma*], in German *Unendlichkeit*, is intertwined with the reality of entrapment in the finite [*sarks*], in German *Endlichkeit* und *Zeitlichkeit*. The everlasting love of God is infused into a dying existence in which loyalties to

15.Van Aarde (& De Villiers, Pieter G.R.) formulates his view as follows: 'This continuous longing helps to make sense of a life that is trapped in temporality and spatiality; a life where joy and happiness is dulled by hurt and each trauma is a dark patch of the unavoidable death that life finally terminates in, without a hereafter' (Van Aarde 2023:3 of 13).

16.Translated from the Afrikaans: Die Bybel – Nuwe Vertaling: Die Bybel 2020-vertaling met Deuterokanonieke boeke, Bybelgenootskap van Suid-Afrika, Bellville.

17.Translated from the Afrikaans: Die Bybel – Nuwe Vertaling.

> religion and future expectations are constantly changing and finally fading (cf. 1 Cor 13:13). (p. 6)

Our life can be compared to a situation in which we are placed in the dock where not we, but God keeps us standing amid tribulation so that everything works for our good. This 'accusation' can consist of people who harm us, circumstances that hurt us, places that scare us, and things such as suffering and death that wear our bodies down.

Our confession about Jesus' ascension and intercession for us is depicted in a touching way in liturgical metaphors (according to Gottfried Schille 1966:183–199, a *Kultätiologie* of the earliest Jerusalem church). These cultic images are liturgically expressed in Revelation (5:3–6, 8–14). We also find something of this in the letter to the Hebrews (4:14; 9:24). Just as in the 'deutero-Pauline' letter to the Ephesians (4:10–13) and with Paul (Rm 8:33–34). The confession in Revelation appears in the form of a song. This confession is, as is the custom in certain cultures[18] (perhaps Ps 110 is also an example of it), a praise of people who honour the king when he comes to power – a king who, following patronage expectations, provides solutions to the needs of his 'clients' as their 'patron' (see ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill 2024).

Contemporary confession

If the dogma about the ascension in the Nicene Creed wants to say something about the inseparable connection between Father and Son, despite the distinction between them, the 'doctrine' contained in it, according to Van Aarde (2012), is not in conflict with the gospel. The connection of the 'unscriptural' words *ek tes ousias* and *homousios* to this specific proposition need not hinder either. The most important aspect of this confession is the experience of faith, expressed as an ode to Jesus Christ, who was not only killed to rescue his followers from sin and death but is also currently interceding for them as a saviour-king enthroned in heaven. In our modern scientific understanding of space and time, where the metaphor of 'heaven' as a specific place has lost its functionality, the question arises: Is our confession about Jesus' ascension truly a heartfelt praise, evidenced by our concrete embodiment of its biblical content?

The essence of our consolation in life and death lies in our belonging to Jesus Christ. Each generation of believers can choose the functional imagery they use to confess that God accomplishes this through Jesus Christ our Lord. One of the most crucial aspects of the church's teaching about 'ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the heavenly Father' is that it should not be seen as a chronological sequence of events following crucifixion and resurrection. Instead, ascension encapsulates Christ's final suffering, summarising everything that happened during his suffering and death. From this point, leading to Pentecost and a new life, the ascension acts as the pivotal moment. The crown of thorns is removed, and a golden crown is placed on his head. However, the ascension does not assert, 'there is Jesus with a golden crown'; rather, it signifies the transition from 'the old' to 'the new', the process of God's justification of the sinner. In mythical language, this is expressed as descending into hell and ascending to heaven.

The liturgical transition from Easter (including 'Good Friday') to Pentecost and Ascension, encompassing the kerygma that brings and gives life, signifies a new cycle in the church year. In the New Testament, the Gospel of John uniquely describes the totality of Jesus' life, suffering, and heavenly patronage as one continuous event. In contrast, the other gospels focus more on episodic narratives. This is well illustrated by Van Gogh's 'Starry Night': night and light, suffering and victory, the crown of thorns and the crown of gold. It portrays a real human being and heralds a golden era for humanity – a divine era.

Unlike the other gospels, John discusses the resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Jesus in a single, consolidated episode. For instance, on Jesus' way to the cross, John describes Jesus' hour of suffering as both a time of crisis and a moment of glory (*doxa*). In John (12:23–50) (my translation), Jesus speaks of his death, referring to it as being 'glorified' and 'lifted up'. Additionally, in John 14:2, Jesus says, 'I am going to the Father to prepare room for you'. He further explains in John (14:23) that the Spirit has already come and made a spiritual home for those who belong to God (Oliver & Van Aarde 1991:393–394). For John, the ascension signifies that Jesus intercedes for people through the Spirit of God, which has already been given to us. Paul emphasises this concept as well, stating that while we do not know how to pray, the Spirit living in our hearts intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (Rm 8:26). Thus, the Spirit has already entered our lives. The ascension portrays Jesus as the advocate (Παράκλητος), sitting at the right hand of God, and at the same time, it is the Spirit who intercedes for us. In essence, the ascension illustrates that God intercedes for us through Jesus.

From the perspective of 'spiritual ascension' and 'personal ascension', John's idiom expresses the belief that we as followers of Jesus are united with Jesus in his crucifixion. We hang on the cross as he does; he is crucified, and therefore are we. His victory is our victory, offering us consolation and advocacy. In John (19:28–37), which quotes Zechariah (12:10–14), this idea culminates as we see 'the one we pierced'. We share in his suffering and are complicit in his crucifixion, participating in a profound offense as part of a world that needed a messiah but did not recognise or accept him. According to John's prologue (Jn 1:9–11), we often fail to see our salvation. When John emphasises the 'seeing' of the kerygma (καὶ ὁ ἑωρακὼς μεμαρτύρηκεν) in the concluding phrase (Jn 19:35–37) of the Gospel of John, before the narratives of the burial, empty tomb, and the last chapter 21 were added by author(s) of the Gospel of John

18.There are many cross-cultural examples, for instance, the choir which performs an ode at the Union Buildings during Nelson Mandela's inauguration as the first black elected president in democratic South Africa on 10 May 1994. Another recent example is 'Welby enthroned as Archbishop', *itvNEWS*, 21 March 2013: Dancers sing an African hymn 'Gbeh Kpa Kpa Ba' – or 'A New Beginning' – celebrating the installation of Rt Rev Justin Welby as the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury. The former Bishop of Durham Justin Welby has been enthroned as the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury. David Cameron, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall attended the ceremony. Viewed 25 July 2024, at https://www.itv.com/news/update/2013-03-21/african-hymn-a-new-beginning-sung-for-welby/.

(see Van Aarde 1985:45–62), the authors employ vivid imagery. It can be paraphrased as standing before God, feeling immense guilt for the suffering God endures for us. We feel guilty, yet simultaneously understand that this painful experience is actually our victory. John quotes Zechariah (12:10–14), stating that we will see the one we have pierced.[19]

The source of Zechariah comes from ancient Mesopotamian literature (Rofé 2008:299). A king can only be king when he has suffered, been humiliated, and insulted. Only then can he be king with love and grace. The 'wounded healer' by Henri Nouwen (1994) serves as a good example in this respect. One can only be truly merciful if one is aware of one's own wounds. Zechariah lives in the post-exile period. He communicates with people who are back after exile and are supposed to have a new life (in New Testament perspective: after the cross and resurrection, now supposed to be 'new') but who do not have enough strength or energy to live the new life. The picture for Zechariah is the temple that was demolished and must be rebuilt. But they do not have enough strength and energy to start the new life. There are just too many obstacles. To enable these people to embrace the 'new life', Zechariah (John) (cf. Bruce 1961:350) tells them about the king who was humiliated by the people at Hadad-Rimmon, pierced and rejected by them (see May 1938:173–184).

Why does John tell this story? In John (19:28), it is reported that Jesus is thirsty, he takes his last breath; his life was accomplished. The soldiers broke the bones of the crucified to make sure that they are really dead. With Jesus, they did not break his bones, but pierced his side with a spear (John tells it differently than the synoptic Gospels) and then water and blood came out. John wants the readers to see the sacramental symbolism in this. This Johannine story says: water is life; blood is life. From death comes life! John reminds his readers of the references to the notion 'pierce' in Zechariah. He refers to Hadad-Rimmon,[20] the 'mountain of Megiddo' (i.e. Armageddon), where the old Canaanite fertility religion was practised. *Hadad* and *Rimmon* were two Syrian divinities (Niehr 2024). The motif of Armageddon is that it is the greatest battle, but also the greatest victory (Oluikpe 2010:1–9). In 2 Kgs (23:28–30) and Jeremiah (22:10) we find the same motif: it is the story of King Josiah – still young. He made a mistake in the war against the Assyrians. He tried to stop the Pharaoh who was on his way to attack Assyria, with his small army. Josiah stands in the way of the mighty Pharaoh. The Egyptians destroy his army and kill Josiah. This story is about a pierced king who was killed, but people celebrate a festival of new life. Destruction becomes the great victory, not the end. New life emerges from humiliation. People must look at the pierced king and realise that they are worthless, small and cannot win the wars of the world. But therein lies the victory.

19.καὶ ἐπιβλέψονται πρός με ἀνθ' ὧν κατωρχήσαντο καὶ κόψονται ἐπ' αὐτὸν κοπετὸν ὡς ἐπ' ἀγαπητὸν καὶ ὀδυνηθήσονται ὀδύνην ὡς ἐπὶ πρωτοτόκῳ (Zch LXX 12:10) = 'They will look to me whom they have pierced; and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for his only son, and will grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for his firstborn' (NIV, Zch LXX 12:10).

20.A place where Josiah was fatally wounded (2 Kgs 23:29-30), and where later there was a memorable mourning for him (Zech 12:11).

Zechariah says to the small, discouraged people who cannot rebuild the temple, who are too tired and discouraged: remember Hadad-Rimmon – you will see him who was pierced by you and God will pour out God's spirit of love and repentance on you. The greatest destruction is the greatest victory. This is John's story of ascension. When Jesus gave up his spirit, they pierced him, blood and water came out and this became his ascension. Where the crown of thorns becomes the crown of gold, where a defeated man becomes the victorious man. This pierced king becomes your advocate. The one that helps you.

With the ascension, a great tribulation occurred, but God prevailed. God's Spirit has been poured out, providing strength, and people are beginning to live and build anew. The new season has arrived, and with it, the time of suffering has ended. The book is closed. The battle is over because we have seen the one we pierced. That is the victory. This is the closest John comes to describing an ascension. Luke says ascended Jesus will return. His Spirit returns repeatedly – existentially, every time, not chronologically. The divine Spirit returns every moment of every day – this is what 'personal ascension', according to John's Gospel, signifies.

At the heart of this article (for Van Aarde and for me) is the idea that the 'ascension of Christ' serves as a liturgical celebration of victory over trauma, acknowledging that the ancient narratives about and references to 'ascension' were written in mythical language. Interpreting these descriptions in a realistic, historical, and literal sense is anachronistic in our time. However, if the 'ascension' is understood metaphorically, it can still be communicated as rich and meaningful victory poetry.

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