

## 2. CHRIST'S ASCENT & DESCENT IN EPHESIANS 4:7-11

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Remember the childhood nursery rhyme about the Grand Old Duke of York? Well, he had 10,000 men and he marched them to the top of the hill. Then he marched them right back down again. And,

When they were up, they were up,

And when they were down they were down,

But when they were only half way up, they were neither up nor down!

Perhaps the Grand Old Duke forgot where he was supposed to be with his army? Be that as it may, his bewilderment is matched only by the Church's confusion regarding her Lord's descent and ascent --- or is it rather his ascent and descent? --- as recorded in [Ephesians 4: 7-11](#).

We saw in part one that most commentators have traditionally viewed these verses as teaching that Jesus first descended to earth by giving up his so-called eternal pre-existence as God. That is, before he could secure our redemption, 'God the eternal Son' had to first become 'the God-man' by 'taking on flesh' in 'the incarnation'. Only then could he ascend back up into heaven after his mission on earth was completed. Down before up!

In the first article we addressed the question of the apostle Paul's alleged misquoting of [Psalm 68:18](#). We noted that [Psalm 68](#) is a Messianic psalm predicting God's great victory through His Messianic King. In other words, Jesus giving ascension-gifts to the church was foretold by God Himself in the Old Testament!

Now, in part two, I will show this passage *in its context* teaches that, Jesus' ascent comes before his descent --- Jesus went up before coming down! In plain language, I wish to prove that [Ephesians 4: 7-11](#) is not a reference to Christ's so-called incarnation-descent, but rather his Pentecostal descent from heaven in the power of the Spirit. I am sure this will be a huge surprise to most of us!

### PROBLEM TWO:- CLEARING UP SOME GRAMMAR!

Depending on which English translation we read, we arrive at a second significant speed bump. The [King James Version](#) --- also called the [Authorised Version](#) --- inserts a doubtful textual variant which is followed by a few more recent translations (e.g. The [New King James Version](#)); I'll make it easy for you to spot!

Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended *first* into the lower parts of the earth ... [V. 9 KJV]?

Did you spot the interloping word? Of course you did! However, even when modern translations follow the now virtually unanimous consensus that the word *first* is a later scribal addition --- which is to say, it's a corruption! --- they still can't quite extricate themselves from the idea that Jesus had to first descend to earth before he could reverse direction and head back up to his previous eternal home.

The majority of commentators readily admit the obvious textual corruption and so **correctly omit** the word *first*. However, this has had no affect upon their exegesis, for they stick to the party-line that an ascent from earth to heaven must surely presuppose a previous descent from heaven to earth. Their

theology dictates at all costs that Jesus was the pre-existent Son of God who came first from heaven down to earth.

### BECAUSE HE HAS ASCENDED ON HIGH ...

Without getting too technical, it's perfectly legitimate to translate the Greek aorist active participle --- **having ascended** --- as, "**Since Christ has ascended on high, he dispensed his gifts to the church.**" Or, "**Because of his ascended position, Christ has distributed his gifts to the church.**" <sup>1</sup>

Observe, **the time** of the capture was post ascension, which all agree was post resurrection out from the grave. Thus, it was **after** his ascension that Jesus took captivity captive when he was exalted to heaven. Taken this way, we are to understand that, **the sphere** where Jesus took his captives --- whoever or whatever they were!--- was **after** Jesus had arrived "**on high**". Which is to say, the arena for capture was above the earth and in heaven!

Let's be clear then: Jesus took no captives from the earth, or from under the earth, back up into heaven. **Since ascending on high Jesus took his captives!** Tricky, hey?

### PROBLEM THREE:- WHAT DOES "THE LOWER PARTS OF THE EARTH" REFER TO?

Some may have doubts about the foregoing by thinking that Paul says Jesus **descended to the lower parts of the earth**. To our modern ears this sure sounds like Jesus' took his captives during a subterranean visit. So, what does this phrase '**the lower parts of the earth**' mean?

**A. The womb?** The phrase, **the lower parts of the earth**, has provoked intense debate. Some suggest it refers to Jesus' conception in the womb of Mary! They quote **Psalm 139: 13-15**,

**For Thou didst form my inward parts; Thou didst weave me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are thy works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from Thee, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.**

We can, I think, dismiss this suggestion quickly. David the psalmist's own conception is what is immediately in view. And if we also believe this is a prophetic Messianic reference to Jesus' conception, we may rest assured neither of these men began their existence **in the depths of the earth**.

Clearly then, this expression is a metaphor, a pictorial phrase, describing how man is formed in his mother's womb. Conception and birth occur in women who are on the earth, not in the depths of the earth.

**B. Preaching to the dead, defeating the Devil?** Others suggest **the lower parts of the earth** refers to the grave, Sheol, the world of the dead, where Jesus descended to preach to the imprisoned spirits. As part of this theory, it is also maintained that, whilst down in Hades, Jesus proclaimed to Satan and his evil demonic hosts their defeat. <sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The Greek aorist participle may be translated by a **temporal** "when" or "while" he ascended, or by a **causal** "because" or "since" he ascended. Context must determine which nuance fits best.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of this topic see chapter Seven "**Another Hope**" under the sub-heading "Christ Preaching to the Spirits in Prison" in my book *They Never Told Me This in Church!* pp329 Second Edition or pp 306 First Edition.

This suggestion can also be dismissed because we are positively told that, it was on the cross that Jesus disarmed Satan and the powers of darkness. In **Colossians 2** the apostle Paul writes that Jesus **disarmed the rulers and authorities, and made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through it (i.e. the cross)** (v. 15).

It was on the cross our Lord cried out, **"It is finished!"** Nothing was left for him to do in the grave, in hell! His work for mankind in defeating Satan's hold was completed on the cross! As **Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones** confirms --- and here I totally endorse his commentary;

There is no indication whatsoever that our Lord finally conquered the devil and his powers in hell after His death; indeed we are told, positively, that that work was done upon the cross. <sup>3</sup> and <sup>4</sup>

Adding weight to the fact that we should understand the phrase **the lower parts of the earth** as simply meaning "the earth" we note that the Greek construction here is probably what's called a genitive of definition or a genitive of apposition. In simple terms, the expression should not be interpreted as "the lower regions of the earth", but simply as "the earth". <sup>5</sup>

The Greek expert **F.F. Bruce** states, **the phrase 'of the earth' may be construed as a genitive of definition, in which case the lower regions are themselves the earth ...'** <sup>6</sup> On which point **Lloyd-Jones** agrees; **the meaning of the phrase 'the lower parts of the earth' is simply the earth itself.** <sup>7</sup>

The Scriptural order here is this: Jesus **first** ascended into heaven before he **took captivity captive** and, only then, did he descend in order to distribute his gifts to men. In simple language: **Ephesians 4: 7-11** says Jesus went up before he came down! This reverses the order that our trinitarian friends insist upon. <sup>8</sup>

But in what possible way may we think that the order is ascent before descent? This order of up before down defies convention and logic, surely?

## THE JEWISH CONNECTION

Jewish commentary has always seen a connection between Moses ascending Mt Sinai to receive the Law --- and his *subsequent* descent to give the Law to Israel.

In fact, this connection is recognized every year when Jews celebrate their annual Feast of Pentecost. To this day **Psalm 68** is one of the assigned *haftarah* readings in the Jewish prayer book for their annual remembrance of Pentecost.

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<sup>3</sup> *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4: 1-16*, Banner of Truth, USA, 1980, p159

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the reasons already adduced, **the lower parts of the earth** almost certainly does not mean the subterranean world of the dead because **1)** There is not a word about Sheol in Psalm 68, **2)** It is strange Paul did not select one of the more quite familiar and unambiguous phrases used elsewhere in the NT to indicate he meant the grave (e.g. **Rom.10:7**), **3)** The passage in **Phil 2: 5-10** which contrasts Christ's descent into the humiliation of death on the cross with his exaltation, says nothing about any visit by Christ into the underworld and, **4)** Christ the Son of God was dead, not conscious in the grave (see *Footnote 1*).

<sup>5</sup> There really is, I think, no contextual support for the Greek partitive genival construction --- a place "below" the earth. Paul is contrasting heaven and earth, but if my reader should choose to disagree, the more obvious reference is to the grave itself, the burial tomb where Jesus' body was placed. Paul's cosmology has the "powers" of darkness in "the air" and in the heavenly realms, and definitely not under the earth (**Eph. 2: 1; 6:12, etc.**).

<sup>6</sup> *The Epistle To The Ephesians: A Verse-by-Verse Exposition*, Pickering & Inglis Ltd., London, 1973 reprint, p83

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p158

<sup>8</sup> For the interested reader, this question is dealt with thoroughly by W. Hall Harris III in *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4: 7-11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery*. Bart Ehrman's seminal *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* also demonstrates scribal "corruption" of the text at this point. Bottom line? The apostle Paul did **not** use the word **first** in relation to Christ's descent!

Harris observes that,

[E]very time Ps 68: 19 was mentioned in rabbinic literature, it was (without exception) interpreted of Moses and his ascent to heaven to receive the Torah. All sources are in agreement that Ps 68:19 referred to Moses and his heavenly ascent; the 'captivity' he 'captured' referred to Torah. <sup>9</sup>

Who can fail to see that, when the church received the initial outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2: 33**), they saw a parallel between the descent of Moses distributing his "gifts" to Israel, and the descent of Christ in his distribution of his gifts to the church? <sup>10</sup>

This OT connection is critical to our discussion; Moses first ascended the mountain before descending to distribute his gift of Torah. It was up before down! Likewise, Jesus first ascended to heaven before subsequently distributing his gift(s) of the Spirit to his followers. That's the foundational OT typology.

#### ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FROM NUMBERS 8: 19 .

When Paul states that after Christ's ascension he distributed gifts to the church in the form of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (**Ephesians 4: 11-12**) some commentators see additional Old Testament support for Paul's application from **Numbers 8: 19**. There the Levites are referred to as **a gift ... to perform the service of the sons of Israel ....** The idea is that the Levites were taken or received from among the sons of Israel as captives for service in God's 'household'.

Similarly, Christ --- *after* his ascension --- gave gifted ministries such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers for the building up of the church;

**And he gave some, apostles; and some prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers (v.11).**

Putting this evidence together, we observe the OT background supplies very logical reasons for rejecting the argument that Christ's pre-existence in heaven before the incarnation is the subject.

That trinitarian pattern *reverses* Paul's argument and *reverses* the OT type which informs his thinking. Repeat: the Bible's order in this passage is ascent before any descent to distribute God's gifts occurs. The parallelism must mean the distribution of gifts was contingent upon the prior ascent into heaven!

We note that Paul has already told us in Ephesians that Christ's ascent into the heavenlies *preceded* his being given by God as the **head over all things to the church which is his body (Eph. 1: 20-21)**. Ascent before giving has already been established.

A glorified, ascended and cosmic Lord is the requirement before any distribution of gifts to equip the church could happen!

#### ONE LAST TWIST!

Those who still wish to read the passage as teaching Christ's descent into the humiliation of incarnation before ascent to heavenly glory, appeal to another popular notion. They note that in

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<sup>9</sup> W. Hall Harris III in *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4: 7-11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996, p91.

<sup>10</sup> Here surely is another example of where the NT is at pains to show the superiority of Messiah Jesus over Moses? Upon his descent, Moses brought the Law of Commandments and ordinances to Israel: Upon his descent after his glorification Jesus gave the Father's promised Pentecostal power of the holy Spirit to his church.

**Psalm 68:18** it is Yahweh Himself who receives gifts from men. It is thus argued that since the NT attributes the distribution of gifts to Christ himself, then *ipso facto* Jesus must be God Himself!

This is a popular argument often appealed to: Since the NT applies OT passages with God as their subject to Jesus Christ, then surely Jesus *has* to be the God of the OT. Performing the functions of God must mean one is God! Right? Wrong!

We have already established in the first article that the booty of Israel's victorious Davidic king was considered to really be Yahweh's gifts to His people. The king was God's anointed agent.

If you don't like that word 'agent' just substitute the Bible word, 'mediator'! The salient point is that the Principle of Agency pervades the Hebrew thinking in the OT. Which means, it is not necessary for Jesus to be Yahweh God in order to carry out the functions of God His Father.

One brief example will sufficiently prove this. When God commissioned **Moses** to *stand before Pharaoh as God* in **Exodus 7: 1**, no-one for a moment imagines Moses was himself God. God told Moses;

**"See, I have made you God to Pharaoh!"**

Moses stands before Pharaoh *as God* with the full authority of heaven! Indeed, says the LORD, **"The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth My hand upon Egypt ..."** (Ex. 7: 5). However, it is Aaron who must stretch out his own rod too, for God instructs, **"Say to Aaron, "Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt ... that they may become blood""** (vs. 19).

When Aaron stretches out his staff, note what God says to Pharaoh in **verse 17**, **"By this shall you know that I am the LORD; behold, I will strike the water that is in the Nile with the staff that is in My hand, and it shall be turned to blood"**.

Aaron's staff is equivalent to God's own hand and staff! Classic Hebrew agency! For when Moses and Aaron stood before Pharaoh they really were **God to Pharaoh!**

Just so, Jesus is perfectly able to speak the words of God and to do the works of God, by His Father's authority and power, without necessitating he be God. When we see Jesus we see God. When we hear Jesus we hear God. Jesus is *functionally* God to us. To function as God before men is no proof of Deity, only that one is in complete harmony with God and that God Himself is working. <sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION? CONTEXT WINS THE DAY!

Those who wish to argue that **Ephesians 4: 7-11** teaches the prior descent of a pre-existent Christ *via* incarnation, and a prior descent into Hades for 3 days grabbing all the righteous dead from Adam onwards before triumphantly leading them in his train *via* his ascension into heaven, not only ignore the interpretive grid from the Old Testament favouring ascent before descent, but they also ignore the context.

Remember at the beginning of this article I asked that we keep the context in mind as we approach this challenging passage? Recall that the subject-matter Paul is dealing with concerns the theme of Christian unity. The whole thrust of the passage concerns the giving of gifts to the church for her upbuilding and effective service.

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<sup>11</sup> For a full treatment of the matter see the sub-section "The Principle of Agency" in my book, [They Never Told Me This in Church!](#) (First Edition pp 64; Second Edition pp 63).



Indeed, Paul has spent considerable time outlining his amazingly unique apostleship to the Gentile nations (**Eph. 3ff**). He has been entrusted with a calling unlike the other apostles, namely to bring to the Gentiles the secret hidden in God's heart from before the world began, but now openly proclaimed --- that the believing Gentiles are fellow-heirs (apart from the Law) with the Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah, that the barrier between both groups has been removed by the cross of Christ, and that God is making of the two groups **one new man (Eph. 2: 11 to 3:13)**.

The method by which God is doing this is that He has appointed Christ to be the head and administrator of this new arrangement (**Eph. 1: 22-23**). Jesus Himself is now overseeing His Father's Kingdom-Plan as he distributes his gifted ministries to the church for her mission to the world.

Harris concludes that,

**The unique contribution made by the author of Ephesians lies in his identification of the ascended Christ as the Spirit who descended at Pentecost to distribute gifts (or gifted individuals) to his church ... This understanding of the descent is also consistent with the Pauline concept of the Spirit as the means/medium/agency through which Christians presently experience God, and in this case especially, the resurrected and exalted Christ.** <sup>12</sup>

Even the trinitarian *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* concedes that,

**On the whole ... Pentecost has more in its favor than the incarnation. It better connects vv.9-10 to the context of giving gifts to the church ... The one who by his Spirit is active in giving gifts to the Church and equipping it for its role is the same one who by virtue of his ascent became cosmic Lord.** <sup>13</sup>

Bravo! Context is always king. Remember how in part 1 I asked us to keep this overall context in mind? The entire passage concerns Christian unity. Because there is **one body, and one Spirit ... and one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all ...** and because **unto every one of us grace is given according to the measure of the gift of Christ, therefore ...** Paul quotes **Psalm 68:18** to demonstrate how God's Messianic King distributes his gifts for the upbuilding of the Church.

The context has nothing at all to say about any so-called incarnational descent of a personally pre-existing God the Son. Nothing!

**Ephesians 4: 7-11** teaches Christ's ascent comes before his descent at Pentecost with gifts for the church. **Ephesians 4: 7-11** also has nothing to say about Jesus doing any work in Sheol to bring the Old Testament saints in triumph into heaven.

Context in this passage affirms Christ went up before he came down, and context wins the day!

The **Grand Old Duke of York** may well have been confused as to whether he was up or down, or only half way up or half way down, but **Ephesians 4: 7-11** is in no doubt that the ascent of the Lord Messiah to God's right hand **in the heights** of heaven --- and his subsequent descent in the medium of the Spirit to give his gifts to the church --- come in the order of up before down!

**Ephesians 4: 7-11** is really the fulfillment of Jesus' own prediction that He himself would not leave the Church in an orphaned state, but that, **"I will come to you" (John 14: 18)!**

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<sup>12</sup> *Op Cit.* p 197

<sup>13</sup> Revised Ed., Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland (General Editors) Zondervan, 2005, Vol. 12 p 114

Let's not miss the powerful message here. The exalted Christ distributing his gifts for the Church is part of the triumph of how God's mighty Kingdom is being consummated in His now glorified Son, just as **Psalm 68** had foreshadowed long ago.

