

1. CHRIST'S ASCENT AND DESCENT in **EPHESIANS 4: 7-10**

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But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,
"When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."

(When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?

He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) (Ephesians 4: 7-10 NRSV)

Anybody at all familiar with the history of interpretation, understands why these verses are regarded as some of the most difficult to exegete in the entire New Testament. Indeed, for reasons soon to become obvious, some regard them as *the most difficult* of all New Testament verses to fathom!

The [Authorized King James Version](#) reads that, Jesus first descended into **the lower parts of the earth** before ascending [i.e. returning] to heaven; **Now that he ascended, what is it, but that he also descended *first* into the lower parts of the earth (Eph. 4: 9)?**



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Upon this reading, it's easy to see where the idea that Jesus' descent occurred prior to, and was a prerequisite for, his subsequent ascension to glory.

Most commentators have traditionally viewed these verses as teaching that, Jesus first descended to earth by giving up his so-called eternal pre-existence. That is, before he could secure our redemption, 'God the 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 was completed. Down before up!

I hope to show that, this passage *in its context* teaches that, Jesus' ascent comes before his descent --- Jesus went up before coming down! In plain language then, I wish to prove that **Ephesians 4: 7-10** is not a reference to Christ's so-called incarnation-descent.

This task is made all the more challenging because, millions around the world confess the order of descent before ascent in the [Apostles' Creed](#), for Jesus ...

[Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, and was buried, He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven ...](#)

Descent before ascent --- and with the added impression that, during the three days of his burial, Jesus was not *really dead* but visiting the nether regions under the earth (commonly called Hades or Hell) grabbing all the godly who had been dead since Adam as his rightful spoils of war.

The victorious Lord, according to this “orthodoxy”, arose from **the lower parts of the earth**, then ascended triumphantly into heaven bringing those released captives with him (presumably as disembodied ‘souls’?) and presented them to heaven’s shouts of delight for, **When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men (v. 8).**

But is it as clear cut and dried as this “orthodox” view would have it? Should the majority of commentators be followed on the basis that there is safety in numbers? Does **Ephesians 4: 7-10** teach that Jesus first went down before he went up? And does the descent of Jesus refer to his incarnation and to his work of releasing captives from the tomb? Surely this interpretation has a definite logical and emotional appeal? At the very least it has the long arm of generations of tradition urging it forward.

THE CONTEXT CONCERNS CHRISTIAN UNITY

Our challenging passage is set in the context of Christian unity. Paul wants Jewish and Gentile believers in Messiah to **keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (4:3)**. The reason is, we all belong to the **one body** and share **one hope** of our calling (v. 4), having participated in **one baptism** into **one Lord** --- Jesus the Messiah --- and therefore, the **One God and Father of all is in you all (v. 6)**.

Previous national distinctions are no longer relevant, for we are all to come to **the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ (v.13)**.

It’s in this context of Christian unity that Paul says Christ has given **grace unto every one of us (v. 7)**. Each and every believer in Christ, has a special contribution to make **according to the measure of Christ’s gift (v.7)**. As he informs us in Corinthians,

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of services, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but the same God Who works all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (I Cor. 12: 4-7).

If you belong to Christ, God has put you in His Church for a reason that only you can fulfill. God has a plan, a purpose just for you to exercise your God-given place, so that the Church is built up into Christ’s mature body.

So, we celebrate unity in diversity. The church’s unity does not come through uniformity or conformity! As in God’s material creation, there is variety galore in each individual Christian’s uniquely gifted contribution to the whole.

Now, I am going to ask us to hold this context firmly in the back of our minds as we proceed. We’ll come back to it in part two! Don’t forget it, okay?

PROBLEM ONE:- DID THE APOSTLE PAUL MISQUOTE PSALM 68: 18?

We learn that the giver of these various spiritual gifts to the church is the ascended Christ himself. This truth is now appealed to by quoting from **Psalm 68: 18**, **“Therefore, it is said ...”**¹

Citing **Psalm 68:18** with Divine authority, Paul says that, since Christ has **ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men (v. 8)**. Which is to say, by quoting **Psalm 68:18** Paul is claiming that **Jesus’ ascension-gifts fulfill God’s prophetic psalm. Christ distributing his gifts to the Church was foretold by God Himself in the Old Testament!**

¹ The Greek verb *legei* may with equal accuracy be translated, **“He says”**. When Scripture says, it is God Who says!

This brings us to the first speed bump!

Psalm 68 is a marvellous hymn of praise to Yahweh God who had given David an emphatic victory over his enemies. Only problem is, Paul's version of **Psalm 68:18** does not exactly correspond with any extant manuscripts, whether from the Hebrew or the Septuagint (LXX)!

In our English Bibles **Psalm 68:18** reads; **You ascended the high mount, leading captives in your train and receiving gifts from people, even from those who rebel against the LORD God's abiding there (NRSV).**

The Hebrew Masoretic text reads, **When you ascended on high, you took captivity [or captives] captive; you took [or received] gifts from mankind, even from the rebellious (Ps. 68:19 MT).**

The LXX follows the Hebrew closely; **When you ascended into the heights and took captive the prisoners, you took [or received] gifts from men, even those who disobeyed, that you might dwell among them (67:19 LXX).**

Psalm 68 portrays Yahweh's triumphant ascent to Mount Zion, leading a train of vanquished enemies and receiving tribute from them. However, in no known version do Paul's words, **He gave gifts to men** occur! The Old Testament version has it that **men are giving gifts to God!** In the NT Paul turns it round and says Messiah is giving God's gifts to men (**Eph. 4: 8**)!

As one commentator expresses it, this is **a remarkable liberty both in reproduction and in application!** This commentator goes so far as to say Paul departs **from the historical meaning of the Psalm ... which is a magnificent description of the victorious march of Israel's God [which] celebrates the establishment of Jehovah's kingdom in the past and proclaims the certainty of its triumph over all enemies and in all nations in the future. It does this in connection with some great event in the history of Israel.**²

Is there any valid reason for Paul's apparent audacious treatment of OT Scripture? And has he really departed **from the historical meaning of the Psalm?** Some have suggested he was quoting from a version of a Hebrew or Greek text of **Psalm 68:18** which is now unknown to us. But I don't like to appeal to unsighted sources simply because they cannot be proved!

Others have suggested Paul was quoting an Aramaic Targum --- a Jewish paraphrase --- that changed the verb from "receiving" to "giving". Now it is true that the NT does have examples of this kind of targumic interpretation.³ And the Syriac Version in the **Peshitta** reads, **Thou hast given gifts to men.** So, at the root of Paul's quote there obviously stands a very ancient oral tradition which he probably was aware of.

However, the alleged difficulty dissipates when we recall that, Israel's victorious kings divided their war booty and shared it with their subjects. God's victorious kings gave gifts to the people on God's behalf!⁴

So I fail to see how this is the big difficulty some make it out to be. The Jewish mind would thus automatically assume that, the spoils of the victory of God's Davidic king would be distributed to His people for the blessing of His kingdom. ***The king's gifts were God's spoils to the people!***

² *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Ed. W Robertson Nicoll, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mi., 1956, Vol. 3, p325

³ For example, **Rom. 12:19** of **Deut. 32: 35**; **Mark 4:12** of **Is. 6:10**.

⁴ In **1 Sam. 30: 26-31** we have a famous example of David's largesse to the Kingdom of Israel, "**Behold, a gift for you from the spoil of the enemies of the LORD ...**". Other examples include **Gen. 14** and **Judges 5: 30**.

Furthermore, many commentators see no problem here because the Psalm is Messianic. Typical of this school is the famous Reformed preacher [Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones](#) who explains that,

Psalm 68 is a great hymn of praise to Jehovah, who has given David a marvellous victory, as He had of old given a notable victory to the children of Israel over Pharaoh and his hosts when He took them through the Red Sea. But David says that Jehovah had 'ascended'. The question is, How can Jehovah, the 'I am that I am', the eternally existing One, without beginning, without end of days, ascend?

The Apostle's answer is that there is but one way in which it can be explained. It is that the very use of the term 'ascend' implies a prior descent --- **Now he that ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?**

There is but one way in which we can speak of a descent of the Godhead and that is in respect of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. It is in Him and in Him alone that God, Jehovah, has descended. So the Apostle argues that the statement of Psalm 68, verse 18, can only be a reference to our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He is not doing any violence to the Scripture as he applies all this to our Lord ... there is no other way in which God has ever descended to earth and again has ascended back into heaven. ⁵

Yes and no! I agree with, and I disagree with, [Lloyd-Jones](#). He is correct to assert that Paul is not doing violence to the intent of the Psalm. **Psalm 68** was seen as a Messianic psalm, and the NT Christians definitely knew that **God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5: 19)**.

However, [Lloyd-Jones](#) then overreaches and extends himself way too far. For he says that Christ was a member of "the Godhead" ⁽⁶⁾, that Christ was Jehovah God who **descended to earth and again has ascended back into heaven**. Sorry [Mr Lloyd-Jones](#), this is where you and I part company for, in the Bible, Jesus is the Christ **of** God, never the Christ who **is** God (e.g. **Lk 9:20**)! In the Bible, Jesus is the Lord Messiah, but never once is he the LORD God!

I believe the apostle Peter also would not agree with [Lloyd-Jones](#) and his many "orthodox" friends who allege that Jesus is a member of the so-called "Godhead" who first descended to earth before ascending back up to his heavenly home, thus making Him in fact, to be Yahweh God Himself. For, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter explains;

Being therefore exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit; he (i.e. Jesus Christ) **has poured out this which you see and hear (Acts 2: 33)**. Christ could only give the Spirit after his ascension to glory where he received such authority according to the promise of God his Father. In heaven now, the ascended Christ is the agent or mediator who is still subordinate to God his Father.

THE LAW OF AGENCY

Throughout Scripture God is said to Himself be present and to work mighty things when in fact, He employs agents or messengers to accomplish His work. Take a simple example. In the **Book of Judges** God often delivered His sinning people into the cruel bondage and servitude of their enemies. Then the children of Israel would cry out to the LORD for deliverance. God would then send them a 'judge' or more literally, a 'saviour'. Typical of the inspired commentary is that,

⁵ *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4: 1-16*, Banner of Truth, USA, 1980, p155-6

⁶ "Godhead" is a word not found in the NT despite the KJV translating the Greek word for 'the Deity' in **Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:20; Col. 2:9** that way.

The LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army, with the edge of the sword before Barak ... and Jael, Heber's wife, took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand, and went secretly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went through into the ground, for he was sound asleep and exhausted. So he died ... so God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the sons of Israel (Jud. 4: 15,21,23).

Who routed Sisera and his army's chariots? Scripture says, **The LORD routed Sisera**. And how did he do this? Scripture says, **With the edge of the sword before Barak**. That sword in Barak's hand and in the hands of Barak's army, was God's sword!

Who drove the tent peg into Sisera's skull? That's right. Jael, a woman. But the Bible says God did it! Here is a classic example of Hebrew thinking where human agency is attributed directly to God ---

And when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer [literally a saviour!] for the sons of Israel to deliver [literally, to save] them (Judges 3:9).⁷

God the Saviour works through human agents who are also called saviours. In classic Jewish thinking, the agent is as the principal himself. Unfortunately our English translations obscure this linguistic fact:- God the Saviour delivers His people through saviours. Just so, God our only Saviour rescues us through our saviour Jesus Christ!⁸

Perhaps if the apostle had anticipated all the theological 'hullabaloo' his quoting from **Psalm 68** would incite, he may have chosen the simpler prophetic word from **Isaiah 53: 12** which predicted the coming Messiah **will divide the spoil with the strong (!?)**. What is this but a clear prediction that the Messiah will distribute gifts on behalf of his God?

Isaiah is in no doubt that Messiah is not Yahweh God Himself, but indeed God's anointed man at His right hand. Under the LORD God the glorified man who is the LORD'S Messiah is authorised to run the government of God's Kingdom!

This is why I don't consider Paul's application from **Psalm 68** at all a stretch. That Messianic Psalm, according to Paul --- and in good Jewish prophetic form --- foretold the ascended Christ would receive from his Father the gifts which He would proceed to bestow among men. **Ephesians 4** therefore celebrates God's victory in the ascension of Christ to His right hand ;

The justification of such an application lies in the fact that the unknown event celebrated in the Psalm was a victory of the Theocratic King, and in that sense a part of that triumph of the Kingdom of God which was to be carried to its consummation by the Messiah.⁹

There is more to be said however, for we need to clear up whether indeed Christ first descended to earth before he ascended back up to his previous abode. After all, doesn't **Ephesians 4: 9** read,

Now that he ascended, what is it, but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth (Eph. 4: 9)?

We must leave the question of whether our Lord first went down before going up, or whether these verses teach the reverse order, as I hope to demonstrate in part two. There are a few more speed bumps to negotiate! So, please stay tuned for Part 2 of *Christ's Ascent & Descent in Ephesians 4: 7-10*.

⁷ Our English translations obscure this linguistic fact: God saves through saviours!

⁸ E.G., **Titus 1: 3-4** in good Jewish thinking is able to call **God our Saviour** and in the next breath say, **Grace and peace from God the Father and [from] Christ Jesus our saviour** --- not because Jesus is God but because God the Father has authorised him to be the agent of our salvation. The same idea is repeated in **Titus 2: 10,13** and in **3: 4,6**.

⁹ *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Ed. W. Robertson Nicoll) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mi. 1956, Vol. 3, p 325

