

BOOK REVIEWS

Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, London: T&T Clark, 2011. Pp. xiv + 177. ISBN: 9780567353573 (Paperback), £ 16.99.

Those interested in the interpretation of the Ascension of Jesus will certainly be acquainted with Prof Douglas Farrow's *Ascension and Ecclesia*, a substantial monograph that attempted to offer an overview of the meaning and implications of the Ascension event and doctrine. *Ascension Theology*, while built upon his previous monograph on the subject, tackles the delicate subject the doctrine of the Ascension in a rather different manner and from a clearly different viewpoint. It appears to be a much more accessible treatment of the theological significance of the Ascension and from a declared Catholic or, as I would put it, more traditional stance. As Farrow himself affirms, being 'only recently a Catholic, and as such not ready to attempt the ecclesiology at which I was aiming, it seems right also to say what I have to say as a Catholic – with important differences that will please some and displease others – even though the book was better than half-written when I was received into communion with Rome' (p. xiii). Farrow also provides many biblical and patristic references that invite the reader to engage further with the many aspects and interpretations of the Ascension.

The book is structured in 7 chapters, with brief and confided *Preface* and *Epilogue*. In chapter one, *The Upward Call* (p. 1), the author locates the event in the descent-ascent schema, offering the context and premises for a subsequent theological interpretation. The Jewish Scripture rapture accounts, and especially Psalm 110:1, represent the background of the Christian understanding of the Ascension of Jesus. Farrow then proceeds to briefly describe the neo-testamental descriptions and allusions to Christ's ascent, emphasising the use of the Old Testament typologies employed by the Evangelists and the author of Hebrews 12.

The second chapter, *Re-imaginings* (p. 15), the author continues with contextualising the Ascension by analysing the neoplatonist use of the ascent-descent schemes, and their interpretations from Origen to Schleiermacher and D.F. Strauss. He presents both the views of Origen (followed by Bultmann), who understands the Ascension 'not so much as a change of place as of state' (p. 20), and of his critics, such as Augustine (followed by Maximus the Confessor), who 'insist on Christ's ascension in the flesh' (p. 21). Farrow concludes the chapter by offering the view of Schleiermacher, whom he calls 'the father of modern theology' (p. 29). According to the more radical Strauss' understanding, and indeed of modern theology, the Ascension is 'among those impossible things which, according to Origen's hermeneutical theory, are included in the scripture only to point us to a higher, mystical meaning...' (p. 30).

In the third chapter, *Raising the Stakes* (p. 33), Farrow aims to offer an eschatological and much more Scripture rooted interpretation, as opposed to the origenist one. He presents and supports the 'ascension in the flesh' (p. 38) found in Irenaeus and the subsequent tradition. The *bodily* Ascension, he writes, 'is deification, and deification nothing but the fulfilment of man's creation... it is a

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transformative relocation by the Spirit into the inexhaustible *Lebensraum* generated for us through full communion with the Father.’ (p. 36). Such an interpretation does not oppose earth to heaven or physical to spiritual realms, but places the Ascension scene within the eschatological line.

In *A Question of Identity* (p. 51), the fourth chapter, the author seeks to answer the question of ‘Who is the “Christ” who will come?’ The Church’s eschatological expectation is deeply rooted in the words of the two angels that appear at Jesus’ Ascension (Acts 1:11), and ‘only as the church persists in expectation of this same Jesus will it prove faithful’ (p. 61). This picture is carried on in the fifth chapter, *Presence in Absence* (p. 63), which explains the (physical?) presence of Christ in the Church (and the world) through the Eucharist, and the doctrine of transubstantiation. Thus, in Farrow’s view, ‘the doctrine of transubstantiation does not deny, but insists, that the church is an eschatological reality’ (p. 79), opposing the protestant views that reject the doctrine of transubstantiation.

In the sixth chapter, *The Politics of the Eucharist* (p. 89), the author presents the celebration of the Eucharist, which he sees as a political act through which the heavenly session of the ascended Christ ‘otherwise invisible and impenetrable to man, is made visible’ (p. 90). Farrow also highlights what he calls ‘two somewhat paradoxical principles’, without which one cannot understand the mystery of the heavenly session of Jesus or ‘the church’s eucharistic witness to it’ (p. 92). The first principle blends the themes of justice and of power, noting that the first precedes the second. The second principle is that evil that exists in the world will always affect the good work of the Church, or, as Farrow puts it, the ‘evil continues to grow by perverting the goods that belong to the church’ (p. 97). He then exposes some of the most destructive scars in the history of the Church, among which he discusses the communist and the fascist movements.

In the final chapter, *Ascension and Atonement* (p. 121), the author aims to explain the way in which through the event of the Ascension the whole world was glorified, the mystery of the exaltation of the fallen humanity. However, he follows Augustine concluding that this great mystery is not fully disclosed to us in this transitional period before the Parousia. Thus, he substantiates, ‘the ascension of Jesus Christ is not the return of God to God. It is the ascension of the God-man to his rightful place, the place of glory that Adam and Eve never knew, but are yet destined to know.’ (p. 150)

After the *Epilogue* (p. 153), two appendices, *A Summary of the Anaphoric Work of Christ* (p. 158) and *Prayers for Ascensiontide* (p. 159), the bibliography and a thematic index complete the volume.

In recent decades, the Patristic interpretations of Scripture attracted more and more the attention of the modern-critical theologians. But, as it is easy to observe, this is not a recent feature, as “critical” commentators have been relying on the interpretation of the Church Fathers since the Reformation. However, engaging

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with Patristic exegesis is not an easy task. Farrow's book represents a wonderful example of contemporary theological reflection based on the 'traditional' Patristic interpretation of the very enigmatical episode of Christ's exaltation. In a fresh and restructured way, the author presented the mystery of Christ's Ascension and his session *ad dexteram dei*, alongside its theological significance for the Christians of today. This insightful monograph calls us to the eucharistic life of the Church, it calls for a new and optimistic faith in the redemptive power of the ascended Christ. The conclusions it reaches, although they may appear controversial and peculiar, spring from a Patristic reading of Scriptural truths, and from the longstanding tradition of the universal Church that confesses through her Creeds the faith in Christ's Ascension and session at the right hand of the Father. We can only applaud Prof Douglas Farrow for his very valuable and inspired book, and hope that it reaches the wide audience intended by its author.

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