



Learning to identify the patterns of ascent throughout ancient scripture and modern revelation will help us connect scriptural passages more readily to the Savior's atoning mission.

Raised unto Eternal Life: The Principle of Ascension in the Revelations of the Restoration

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Onward and Upward

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation.”¹ This step-by-step ascension is both literal and symbolic. Ascension was woven throughout ancient scripture and climaxed in Jesus Christ’s physical ascension into heaven. What does ascension represent for Latter-day Saints? How are we to understand its implications in our own salvific journey? The answers to these questions, touched upon briefly by ancient scriptural authors, were brought to fruition by Joseph Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants. As a restorer of eternal truth, Joseph grasped a theology of ascension and extended it into our day and beyond to the millennial day. It is then that faithful followers of Christ are promised that notwithstanding a necessary descent into tribulation, “you may *come up* unto the crown prepared for you, and be made rulers over many kingdoms” (Doctrine and Covenants 78:14–15; emphasis added).

“Ascension” as discussed in this article refers to the event in which followers of Jesus Christ are taken up into heaven preparatory to receiving their mansion in the Father’s house (see John 14:2). This literal ascension is preceded by internal and symbolic moments of ascent scattered throughout a lifetime of discipleship. Although other Christian faiths seem to be more saturated with an ascension theology than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is,² some scholars and even clergy have criticized their own churches for “dumbing down” the significance of Christ’s ascension and its commemoration. One minister asserted that “most Christians today do not commemorate Jesus’ ascension as part of our worship experience.”³ In his work *Ascension Theology*, noted scholar and professor Douglas Farrow bluntly assesses that “the doctrine of the ascension has become an enigma, if not an embarrassment. The corresponding liturgical feast, once one of the church’s great feasts, is poorly celebrated.”⁴ Fortunately, for those with “ears to hear,” the Lord, through Joseph Smith, has restored a rich theology of ascension in our day which empowers followers of Christ to regain the Father’s presence not only by resurrection, but through ascension unto exaltation.⁵

What do the revelations of the Restoration teach us about ascension? To answer this question, we must first understand the themes of ascension woven throughout scripture which point to the redemptive significance of Christ’s own ascension. On this foundation we will examine what the Doctrine and Covenants reveals about the ascended Christ, how it refines the concept of being “raised up” or “lifted up,” and how it paves the way for a simulation of ascension in ritual worship. Lastly, we will review what the Doctrine and Covenants uncovers about the actual ascension of the Saints at the Lord’s Second Coming.

Learning to identify the patterns of ascent throughout ancient scripture and modern revelation will help us connect scriptural passages more readily to the Savior’s atoning mission. We are then better equipped to point those we lead and teach to him as they learn to gaze heavenward into their own glorious destiny.

A Pattern of Descent and Ascent

Throughout the Old Testament are many examples of both deity and prophets experiencing ascent and descent (the latter being a prerequisite for the former, as will be shown hereafter). For example, Adam and Eve lived in the presence of God until a *fall* led to their being cast away from it⁶ and Noah, “a

just man and perfect” (Genesis 6:9) was carried up “above the earth” (Genesis 7:17) in an ark while all of creation perished in the Flood. Descending from Mount Ararat, Noah’s posterity eventually embraced the wickedness of the past and sought a counterfeit ascent up the tower of Babel. In response, the Lord came “down” (Genesis 11:5) and the people were confused and scattered. Other notable examples include the descent of Joseph into a pit from whence he ascended and gained command over all of Egypt, the descent of Jacob’s posterity into slavery and their ascent into Sinai and the presence of God via their prophet-leader, and the descent of Jonah into “the belly of hell” (Jonah 2:2) only to be brought up again through the Lord’s mercy. Perhaps the earliest such pattern can be traced to our “first primeval childhood”⁷ in the premortal existence. It was here that the gods declared, “We will go *down*, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:24–25; emphasis added). In accordance with the Father’s plan, the children of God decided to descend and leave their “more exalted sphere.”⁸

“It is against this backdrop,” notes Douglas Farrow in his work *Ascension Theology*, that “the story of Jesus was consciously told.”⁹ As the focal point of Christianity it is appropriate that Christ himself was the ultimate example of descent and ascent. As the mortal Messiah, he condescended as Word made flesh (see John 1:14). Born in the lowliest of circumstances, he eventually rose to the point of receiving a king’s welcome upon his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. He is shortly thereafter stripped of honor, acclaim, and even clothing, and condemned to death as a common criminal where—in an ironic imitation of ascent—he is “lifted up upon the cross” (3 Nephi 27:14). The postmortal Christ also descended and “preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19) until eventually he “[arose] with healing in his wings” (Malachi 4:2) through resurrection. He ultimately ascended into heaven “being by the right hand of God exalted” (Acts 2:33).

Although mentioned in the epistles, Christ’s actual ascension event is related only three times in the New Testament—once in Mark, once in Luke, and once in Acts. Several references to ascension made by Christ himself are found in John;¹⁰ however, there is no record in this gospel of an ascension actually happening. Even Mark seems to give the event just passing mention in what some scholars consider an unauthentic, extended ending.¹¹ In his comprehensive work *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology*,¹²

A. W. Zwiep explains that Luke framed his New Testament ascension narratives in the style of Jewish rapture accounts, such as the ascent of Elijah the prophet (see 2 Kings 2:1–15). In this manner, Luke employed an established pattern in which the main character's ascent is compensated for by an outpouring of the spirit (the Day of Pentecost in Luke's narrative) and in which ascension implies an imminent eschatological return. The way in which Luke framed Jesus Christ's ascension narratives serves at least two purposes: First, it eases the burden of Christ's disappearance, especially for a people persecuted and scorned in his absence. In moments of doubt and despair, they could gaze into heaven, remembering his promise that "where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:3). Second, it points readers toward the Lord's Second Coming and to the vindication and exaltation of his followers. Luke did not provide definitive closure, but in foreshadowing the Lord's return, he allowed for the pattern of descent and ascent to be continued.

The Essential Ascension

The ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven has merit alone as a symbol of his overcoming the world. However, it takes on even greater significance in terms of its implications for humankind.¹³ This facet is equally important to understand in order to fully appreciate its role in the Doctrine and Covenants. The Book of Mormon contains one of the earliest and most explicit references to the importance of Christ's ascension. Mormon summarized the doctrine taught by Abinadi and Alma around 147–145 BC as centering on "the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection *and* ascension into heaven" (Mosiah 18:2; emphasis added). This doctrine was corroborated over 200 years later when the apostle Paul wrote that "when [Christ] ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men" (Ephesians 4:8). Within two hundred years of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, Origen (AD 184–253), one of the best-known Christian fathers, declared that the "perfection of the resurrection was when [Jesus] came to the Father."¹⁴

The knowledge of this importance was not lost on subsequent Christian leaders and thinkers. Leo the Great (AD 400–461) theologically captured the belief that because of Jesus's ascension, "our human nature, united with the divinity of the Son, was on the throne of his glory. The ascension of Christ is our elevation."¹⁵

As evidenced in these descriptions, the Ascension played a unique role in Christ's redemptive mission and has both literal and symbolic implications. By ascending in human form, endowed with our mortal nature, Jesus Christ carried humanity back into the presence of God, bringing an end to mankind's separation from the heavenly Holy of Holies (see Hebrews 9:24).

The Ascended Christ Revealed Anew

To observers in both the Old and New World, the ascension of Christ took place in a cloud (see Acts 1:9 and 3 Nephi 18:38–39), symbolizing both the divine nature of this occurrence and the veil which would now mostly conceal Christ from his followers on earth. Centuries later, in a series of manifestations in which “the veil was taken from our minds, and the eyes of our understanding were opened” (Doctrine and Covenants 110:1), Joseph Smith was authorized to begin pulling back this veil and commence the fulfillment of John the Beloved's promise that, “[Christ] cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him” (Revelation 1:7). In our dispensation, Joseph included Christ's ascension in the list of key atoning acts when he noted that “the fundamental principles of our religion is the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, ‘that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, *and ascended* up into heaven;’ and all other things are only appendages to these, which pertain to our religion.”¹⁶ Contrasting to the ascension cliffhanger left by Luke, the restoration allows for a continued and deeper understanding of this key event.

The revelations of the restoration carry readers into the culmination of Christ's salvific work for humanity. The Doctrine and Covenants reveals the character of the Ascended Lord by providing a detailed overview of the Savior's return “in like manner” (Acts 1:11) and by illustrating the literal and symbolic implications of ascension for all true followers of Christ. “For ye are the church of the Firstborn, and he will take *you* up in a cloud, and appoint every man his portion” (Doctrine and Covenants 78:21; emphasis added). Thus Joseph Smith was instrumental in bringing to fulfillment a theology of ascension that prepares disciples of the Savior to be “raised in immortality unto eternal life” (Doctrine and Covenants 29:43).

In this capacity, Joseph was indeed “a translator, a revelator, a seer, and prophet” (Doctrine and Covenants 124:125). Elder D. Todd Christofferson testified that “each of these titles has particular significance, but there is no more important aspect of his prophetic mission than his revelation of Jesus

Christ in our time. . . . The Prophet Joseph Smith is the great latter-day revelator of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ As is appropriate in his role as a revelator, Joseph revealed the character and nature of the ascended Christ for our day in ways that transform him and his acts from a distant abstract into a living reality. These revelations allow us to go beyond the simpler journalistic accounts of ancient scripture and understand more deeply how this event is efficacious to us personally. Three major dimensions of the ascension which are expanded on by the Restoration include first, the Savior as having descended below all things; second, the Savior as an advocate; and lastly, the Savior as being in the midst of his people.

Descending Below All Things

The Apostle Paul recognized that Jesus Christ descended into “the lower parts of the earth” before he “ascended up far above all heavens” (Ephesians 4:9–10). The Doctrine and Covenants contributes to this observation by stating that the Lord “descended below all things” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:6). A poignant revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith delivers a list of heart wrenching trials through which he might be called to endure. These included being at peril on land or sea, being stripped from his family, being helpless at the hands of robbers and murderers, losing his life, or even facing the jaws of hell itself (see Doctrine and Covenants 122:5–7). After introducing these possibilities, the Savior in first person offered both his testimony and a rhetorical question: “The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?” (Doctrine and Covenants 122:8). This statement gives us a deeper understanding of ascension as Christ himself seems to indicate that his descent “below them all” is directly tied to his ascension into one “greater than” all.

The Savior’s ministry involved a descent of infinite proportions. President Brigham Young noted, “According to the philosophy of our religion we understand that if he had not descended below all things, he could not have ascended above all things.”¹⁸ The Doctrine and Covenants explains why: “He descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:6). This aligns with Alma’s description of Christ’s atonement given in the Book of Mormon:

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled

with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance; and now behold, this is the testimony which is in me. (Alma 7:12–13)

The Doctrine and Covenants amplifies our understanding of Christ's ascension by placing it in tandem with his descent. It testifies of "he that ascended up on high, *as also* he descended below all things" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:6; emphasis added). Through his descending, Jesus Christ is empowered to truly succor all his creations. His subsequent ascension enables him to take this power to the throne, where he administers it throughout "the immensity of space" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:12).

The Ascended Advocate

The Doctrine and Covenants next sheds light on the Christ who, having first descended below all things, has been given "power to make intercession for the children of men—having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; standing betwixt them and justice" (Mosiah 15:8–9). The word *advocate*, meaning "one who defends, pleads, intercedes, or speaks in behalf of another,"¹⁹ is used one time in the English-language King James Version of the Bible (see 1 John 2:1). In contrast, it is used six times in the Doctrine and Covenants—each time by the Savior in reference to himself and his redemptive work in the presence of the Father.

While we have a record of Jesus praying for others—even in intercessory fashion—(see John 17), the Doctrine and Covenants reveals with powerful imagery the Lord, now ascended, pleading for his people. Christ himself extends an invitation to us: "Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified; wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life (Doctrine and Covenants 45:3–5).

The affirmation of our having an ascended Advocate is included in the Doctrine and Covenants as a reason to rejoice. "Lift up your hearts and be glad, for I am in your midst, and am your advocate with the Father; and it is

his good will to give you the kingdom” (Doctrine and Covenants 29:5). The revelations link us more precisely to the Savior who is now “set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2) and having arrived there ahead of us, pleads our case before him.²⁰

Christ among Us

Lastly, the scriptures help us to understand that that the ascension allows for the Saints to have continued access to the person and power of Christ, rather than a separation from them. Though ascended, the Savior would continue to comfort and guide his people, chastising them as necessary. Amid sore tribulation in New Testament times, John the Beloved saw that Jesus Christ was in the midst of the seven churches (see Revelation 1:13, 20). The Apostle Paul described the Church metaphorically as “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27). Members of the Church comprise the body while Jesus Christ stands as the head (See Colossians 1:18). The *totus Christus*, or symbol of the complete body of Christ, if taken literally, leaves the Church headless and thereby defunct in Christ’s absence. This metaphor not only teaches the Church its utter dependence on Christ but also implies a potential for the body yet to be unlocked.

In her work on ascension theology in Anglo-Saxon literature, medieval literature professor Johanna Kramer summarizes this potential by explaining that “when Christ the Head ascends to heaven, he marks out the path for the Body to follow.”²¹ The entire aim of the body is uniting with the head. It is only the head and body together that can attain the highest heights. Kramer continues, “As part of the *totus Christus*, Christians have the privileged opportunity to reach heaven, but only if the diverse limbs can discipline themselves enough to jointly follow the head. . . . The body—the Church—does not and cannot consist of individuals but succeeds only through a collaborative—and watchful effort.”²² In outlining the reunion of the Head with the body, the Doctrine and Covenants enlarges our view of what the ascension of Jesus Christ unlocks for humanity.

As a special witness of Christ, Joseph peeled back layers of abominable creeds and corrupt professions of truth (see Joseph Smith—History 1:19) and empowered disciples of Christ in this dispensation to have direct communication with the head of the Church. Among the principles restored pertaining to the nature and character of the Lord is his active role in the affairs of his kingdom. The preface to the Doctrine and Covenants reminds

“the inhabitants of the earth” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:6) yet again that “the Lord shall have power over his saints, and shall reign in their midst, and shall come down in judgment upon . . . the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:36). The Doctrine and Covenants stands as evidence that Jesus Christ, from his ascended seat on high, is aware of his people and is willing to draw near unto them as they draw near unto him (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:63). It reminds us that the ascension of Jesus Christ was not a disappearing act, but an unfolding development in all the prophecies and promises made to humanity. In the latter days, “the long, long silence broke,”²³ and all things will be fulfilled “whether by [Christ’s] own voice or by the voice of [his] servants, it is the same” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:38). Jesus Christ is not an absentee landlord. He is actively engaged in his kingdom both personally and through his appointed servants.

Raised Up and Lifted Up

Having established the Doctrine and Covenants’ distinguished role in revealing the ascended Jesus, we now turn to its contributions in refining our understanding of the ascension made possible by him for his followers. On Easter Sunday, Latter-day Saints around the world joyfully sing the words

He is risen! He is risen!
He hath opened heaven’s gate.
We are free from sin’s dark prison,
Risen to a holier state.²⁴

At first glance, the phrase “risen to a holier state” is typically associated with resurrection, not ascension. Regarding such a phenomenon, Douglas Farrow bluntly warned that “to cut short the journey of Jesus by conflating resurrection and ascension . . . is to alter the goal of salvation history.”²⁵ In an article penned for the February 1982 *Ensign* magazine, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley praised the path to salvation made possible by him who is “the resurrection, and the life” (John 11:25). He then stressed, almost as if to caution against a premature celebration, “But there is a goal beyond the Resurrection. That is exaltation in our Father’s kingdom.”²⁶ The resurrection is an unconditional gift to all mankind. In contrast, some of the references made in scripture to being lifted or raised up have conditions attached to them, implying that they refer to a different type of being risen.

The notion of a conditional ascension in addition to an unconditional resurrection is amply exemplified in the Doctrine and Covenants. One

example is the Lord's promise to Martin Harris that "*if thou art faithful in keeping my commandments, thou shalt be lifted up at the last day*" (Doctrine and Covenants 5:35; emphasis added). A similar promise is made to Oliver Cowdery: "*Stand fast in the work wherewith I have called you, and a hair of your head shall not be lost, and you shall be lifted up at the last day*" (Doctrine and Covenants 9:14; emphasis added). The three witnesses were likewise assured, "*And if you do these last commandments of mine, which I have given you, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; for my grace is sufficient for you, and you shall be lifted up at the last day*" (Doctrine and Covenants 17:8; emphasis added). Another example of the terms 'raised up' and 'lifted up' as equating to ascension or exaltation and not only to resurrection is found in the 124th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, where the Lord references "the exaltation or lifting up of Zion" (Doctrine and Covenants 124:9).

It is clear from sacred scripture that not every being who is resurrected is automatically "risen to a holier state," as the hymn goes (see also Alma 41:2, 13). This distinction is critical because, as exemplified in the Doctrine and Covenants, the ascension of Jesus Christ broadens our understanding of redemption by virtue of what it affords us independent of the universal resurrection. In this spirit, President Russell M. Nelson testified and petitioned that "the *lifting* power of the Lord can be yours if you will come unto Christ and be perfected in him. . . . I pray that each of us may so endure and be *lifted up* at the last day."²⁷

In stark contrast to the ascension of those "who are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly place, the holiest of all" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:66), Joseph Smith also learned the fate of "they who will not be gathered with the saints, to be caught up unto the church of the Firstborn, and received into the cloud" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:102). The revelations make clear that only the righteous will be "caught up," or ascended, to meet Christ.

"Praise to the Man"

The possibility of ascent thrilled the prophet of the Restoration. Joseph once exclaimed: "I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things."²⁸ Through Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon, the Lord added to ancient ascension narratives (such as those of Moses, Elijah, and Enoch) by introducing the Three Nephites. These Nephites were spared from death to minister as special witnesses of Christ until his return in glory.

Christ promised them “ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one” (3 Nephi 28:10). The three disciples were then “caught up into heaven, and saw and heard unspeakable things” (3 Nephi 28:13). Being carried up into heaven was a part of being “even as I [Christ] am.” As a result of their momentary ascension “they were sanctified in the flesh, that they were holy, and that the powers of the earth could not hold them” (3 Nephi 28:39).

Joseph believed that such sacred experiences need not be the privilege of only a select few. In fact, in his 2005 doctoral dissertation, independent scholar John Walsh asserts that “Smith’s entire theology is geared towards enabling mankind to achieve ascension.”²⁹ Joseph Smith maintained such a perspective until he was martyred in 1844. Shortly before his death he preached what has come to be known as the King Follett sermon, in which he added to resurrection the concept of dwelling in everlasting burnings in immortal glory: “What is it? To inherit the same power, the same glory and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a god, and ascend the throne of eternal power, the same as those who have gone before.”³⁰ Joseph saw the Savior’s ascension as an invitation—one which he delighted in empowering others to accept. Perhaps because it seemed to be so consistently on the prophet’s mind, Latter-day Saints in congregations worldwide sing joyfully not only about an ascended Jesus, but an ascended Joseph.

Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven!
Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain.
Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren;
Death cannot conquer the hero again.³¹

Covenant Ascension

The concept of ascent into God’s kingdom is also crucial to the temple worship structure restored by the Lord through Joseph Smith and polished by his successors. The “spirit of prophecy and revelation” (see Doctrine and Covenants 20, heading) captured in the Doctrine and Covenants, coupled with his translation of the Book of Mormon, allowed Joseph to glean the beginnings of a compelling temple ceremony. “And because of the fall of man came Jesus Christ, even the Father and the Son; and because of Jesus Christ came the redemption of man. And because of the redemption of man, which came by Jesus Christ, they are brought back into the presence of the Lord” (Mormon 9:12–13). It is perhaps unsurprising then that throughout the

Doctrine and Covenants, the Savior repeatedly instructed his people on why and how they should “establish a house” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:119) unto him.

Using this understanding and continuing revelation, the prophet of the restoration established a framework of ceremonial worship that exhibits mankind falling from and being brought back (or lifted) into the presence of God. The intended emulation of Christ’s ascent and receipt of power is echoed in Joseph Smith’s dedicatory prayer for the Kirtland Temple. He pled, “Holy Father, that thy servants may go forth from this house armed with power, and that thy name may be upon them, and thy glory be round about them, . . . that when the trump shall sound for the dead, we shall be caught up in the cloud to meet thee, that we may ever be with the Lord” (Doctrine and Covenants 109:22, 75). As Truman G. Madsen beautifully testified, “It is [Christ] who voices and magnifies and endows the temples with a summation of human experience that is a step-by-step ascent into his presence.”³²

In holy temples, the process of ascent is simulated both figuratively and, at times, literally. The figurative ascension is attained by the reception of higher and higher laws which advance worshippers by degrees until they finally enter into the presence of God. Brigham Young University professor Daniel C. Peterson identified the covenant path of ascent in both ancient and modern temple worship: “You go in deeper and deeper into the divine as you go into the temple. In modern temples, what do we do? We actually ascend. In some of the older temples, it’s a physical ascent. In the Salt Lake Temple, as you go through the temple, you’re actually climbing.”³³ This ascension into the divine can be viewed as part of the “grace to grace” process which the Savior went through “until he received a fulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:13). In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Saints are taught that they also can progress grace for grace and receive of God’s fullness through following the pattern established by the Son of God (see Doctrine and Covenants 93:18–20). In this sense, Latter-day Saint “temple rituals taken collectively are covenant rituals of theology that imitate the complete ascension process through a course of religious drama and instruction.”³⁴

Coming in the Clouds

In both the Old and New Testaments, the glory of the Lord is “shown forth in a cloud.”³⁵ This symbol also serves as a curtain that conceals the divine presence from mortal eyes. The dual nature of the cloud as both trumpet

and shroud is employed in the ascension of Jesus Christ as witnessed in both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. The Galilean Apostles saw that Christ “was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). This testimony is also included—not by coincidence—in the telling of Christ’s visit to the New World. The Book of Mormon records that “there came a cloud and overshadowed the multitude that they could not see Jesus. And while they were overshadowed he departed from them, and ascended into heaven” (3 Nephi 18:38–39).³⁶

Just as clouds hid the Savior from view while he ascended into heaven, they will be among the signs that usher in his return. “And then they shall look for me, and, behold, I will come; and they shall see me in the clouds of heaven, clothed with power and great glory; with all the holy angels; and he that watches not for me shall be cut off” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:44). The reunion of Christ and his people “in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:17) is depicted with great clarity in latter-day revelation. Once again, where New Testament writers record inspired promises, Jesus Christ validates and expounds upon them in the Doctrine and Covenants. Adding his testimony to what was spoken anciently, the Master explains to the readers of our day: “For the hour is nigh, and that which was spoken by mine apostles must be fulfilled; for as they spoke so shall it come to pass; For I will reveal myself from heaven with power and great glory, with all the hosts thereof, and dwell in righteousness with men on earth a thousand years, and the wicked shall not stand” (Doctrine and Covenants 29:10–11).

When viewed under an ascent-descent lens, the initiation of the Millennium, with the Lukan ascension narratives as its preface, can be described in three phases: The Savior ascending in the clouds, the Savior descending in the clouds, and the Savior causing his Saints to ascend into the clouds. We will now discuss the third phase, which begins a literal fulfilling of the ascent into heaven made possible by Jesus Christ for his followers.

Ascending to Meet Him

Being the culmination of both worthy living and covenant worship, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the most glorious visuals of the millennial day portrayed in the Doctrine and Covenants is that of the Saints ascending to meet the Lord when he returns. This ascension is also indicative of the Saints receiving a glorified state through “the great Mediator of all men” (2 Nephi 2:27).

Paul is the first to reference the ascension of the Saints as part of the millennial return of the Savior. Using Lukan imagery, the Apostle comforted the Thessalonians by pointing them to this occasion: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

Likewise, Elder Orson Pratt, one of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in our dispensation, reflected, “I have read these few passages of Scripture relating to the great day of the coming of our Lord, according as it is predicted by the mouth of the ancient Apostle, and also concerning a very important event which will then happen, namely, the resurrection of the righteous dead—those who are in Christ; and also another event closely connected with the resurrection—namely, the ascension of the Saints then living upon the earth.”³⁷

In the Doctrine and Covenants we find the reiteration of these promises with additional detail. In the 45th section, the Lord states that “the saints that have slept shall come forth to meet me in the cloud” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:45). The next verse qualifies the group of Saints who will ascend to meet the Lord. “If ye have slept in peace, blessed are you; for as you now behold me and know that I am, even so shall ye come unto me and your souls shall live, and your redemption shall be perfected” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:46). In the manner of Christ’s own journey to the Father, the righteous followers of Christ are promised ascension after their resurrection. The verse also suggests that in this process, their “redemption shall be perfected.”

In another revelation, the group of those who are caught up to meet Christ is expanded to include not only the faithful who have died, but also the faithful who yet remain on the earth.

And the saints that are upon the earth, who are alive, shall be quickened and be caught up to meet him. And they who have slept in their graves shall come forth, for their graves shall be opened; and they also shall be caught up to meet him in the midst of the pillar of heaven—they are Christ’s, the first fruits, they who shall descend with him first, and they who are on the earth and in their graves, who are first caught up to meet him; and all this by the voice of the sounding of the trump of the angel of God. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:96–98)

It is the ascended Saints who “shall be filled with his glory, and receive their inheritance and be made equal with him” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:107). They have the privilege of ascending to the Lord and then descending with him. These Saints have chosen to be “raised in immortality unto eternal life” (Doctrine and Covenants 29:43).

Collective Ascension

Ascension and exaltation in the Father’s kingdom invoke a joint effort in following Jesus Christ upward. Although Christ as the head does continue to govern the affairs of his kingdom on earth through prophets, seers, and revelators, the joy of a literal reunion between body and head is showcased in Joseph Smith’s revelations pertaining to the Second Coming.

Part of the millennial celebration includes a redemption song of Zion. The 84th section of the Doctrine and Covenants presents the words to the song that mentions a group of Saints being taken up:

The Lord hath redeemed his people;
And Satan is bound and time is no longer.
The Lord hath gathered all things in one.
The Lord hath brought down Zion from above.
The Lord hath brought up Zion from beneath. (Doctrine and Covenants 84:100)

As prophesied, the Lord will cause the city of Enoch to descend and join forces with the ascending Latter-day Zion before they are both taken up into heaven. This will fulfill the Lord’s promise to Enoch that “then shalt thou and all thy city meet them there, and we will receive them into our bosom, and they shall see us; and we will fall upon their necks, and they shall fall upon our necks, and we will kiss each other; And there shall be mine abode, and it shall be Zion, which shall come forth out of all the creations which I have made; and for the space of a thousand years the earth shall rest” (Moses 7:63–64). This reunion of the Lord’s people, a people of “one heart and one mind” (Moses 7:18), makes ascension a communal experience in which two parties who have been caught up with the Lord because of their righteousness rejoice together as they participate in the commencement of his reign.

Being lifted up depends on individual agency but it is not meant to be an individual event. It comes through the unified efforts of faithful sons and daughters of God who have been made perfect in Jesus Christ. The Lord reiterates in the 78th section: “Wherefore, do the things which I have commanded you, saith your Redeemer, even the Son Ahman, who prepareth all

things before he taketh you; For ye are the church of the Firstborn, and he will take you up in a cloud, and appoint every man his portion” (Doctrine and Covenants 78:20–21). This thought is expressed beautifully in a phrase shared by Sister Linda K. Burton during a 2015 general conference address: “Thee lift me and I’ll lift thee, and we’ll ascend together.”³⁸ Ascending personally to meet Jesus exemplifies his Atonement as being individual. Ascending as the Church of the Firstborn to meet “Enoch’s band”³⁹ reminds us that his atonement is also infinite in scope.

Conclusion

As one of the “fundamental principles of our religion,”⁴⁰ the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven is a source of hope and a reminder of our final destination along the covenant path. In this dispensation we are blessed with knowledge about the nature and character of our Ascended Savior. We also have a blueprint of what his ascension unlocks and entails for each of us. These truths are evident both literally and symbolically across ancient scripture. In our day, they are compiled in the Doctrine and Covenants as revealed through Joseph Smith. They are reflected in temple worship. And they are evidenced in the lives of followers of Jesus Christ who “seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). In his role as prophet of the restoration, Joseph breathed life into scriptural notions of ascension and placed within our grasp “the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14), even being raised up into eternal life.

Just as Jesus descended below all things and “had to humble himself in order to be exalted in the Ascension,”⁴¹ disciples of the Savior covenant to descend by bearing one another’s burdens, mourning with those who mourn, and comforting whosoever needs comfort (see Mosiah 18:8–9). This descending discipleship includes offering to the Lord a broken heart and a contrite spirit and walking in humility before him. It begins with the covenant of baptism and brings us before the holiest altars of the temple. President Russell M. Nelson reflected, “Surely, being baptized after the manner of his baptism signifies that through our obedience and effort we, too, can come from the depths to ascend to lofty heights of our own destiny.”⁴² It is this ascent that we celebrate and for which we long. As the English monk Saint Bede (AD 672–735) expressed so poetically, “Behold, we have learned in our Redeemer’s ascension wither all our effort should be directed; behold, we

have recognized that the entrance to the heavenly fatherland has been opened up to human beings by the ascension into heaven of the Mediator between God and human beings. Let us hurry, with all eagerness, to the perpetual bliss of the fatherland.”⁴³

The testimony recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants concerning he who “ascended into heaven, to sit down on the right hand of the Father, to reign with almighty power according to the will of the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 20:24) is key in our understanding of Jesus Christ and of our own eternal journey. To forgo this ascension component is to incompletely portray the High Priest who “became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens” (Hebrews 7:26, KJV). Seizing the “eternal round” (Doctrine and Covenants 3:2) of our salvific journey brought full circle in the revelations of restoration, we can more fully exclaim, “death is conquered, man is free, Christ has won the victory!”⁴⁴

Notes

1. “History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” 1971, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/343>.
2. Christ’s Ascension is described as “the crowning of the purpose of Jesus’ life and death in the restoration of fellowship between heaven and earth. See Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 45.
3. Ray Vander Laan, *The Mission of Jesus Discovery Guide: Triumph of God’s Kingdom in a World in Chaos* (New York: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2016), Session Four.
4. Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), xi–xii.
5. See Jared Hickman, “Bringing Forth the Book of Mormon,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 55, 64–65. One such example of Joseph restoring a theology of ascension can be seen in his dramatically different approach to the account of the translation of Enoch (as mentioned in Genesis 5:24 and Hebrews 11:5) when compared to traditional biblical theologians and commentators. Hickman demonstrates that this account “can even be seen as providing the script for Smith’s entire career. Having launched himself as a religious leader by publishing the Book of Mormon, Smith soon initiated a project to revise the Bible that included a dramatic expansion of the Enoch narrative (now canonized as Moses 7). In Smith’s retelling, Enoch founds a city of holiness named Zion that is taken into heaven with him. Enoch’s Zion provided the blueprint, as Terryl Givens has described it, for Smith’s subsequent work of restoration, the ultimate objective of which was nothing more or less than building a new city of Zion, like Enoch’s that would be translated to heaven.”

6. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, in speaking of the Savior's power to end Adam and Eve's "spiritual banishment" recognized that "fortunately, there was going to be way out and a way up." Jeffrey R. Holland, "Behold the Lamb of God," *Ensign*, April 2019, 44; emphasis added.

7. Eliza R. Snow, "O My Father," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292.

8. Snow, "O My Father."

9. Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, 6.

10. In John 20:16–17 the risen Lord commands Mary, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." The ascension that served to capstone Christ's redemptive work into the Father's presence seems to have happened between this conversation and the Savior's subsequent appearance to the Apostles in which he invites Thomas to "reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side" (John 20:27). The scriptures record at least two other ascensions such as in Luke 24 and 3 Nephi 18. In this paper, I choose not to differentiate between ascension events. The salvation made manifest by the Savior's initial return to the Father is the focus at hand, and all other recorded ascensions of Jesus Christ can be viewed as testifying of and symbolizing that glorious return and the unlocking of the heavens to mankind.

11. A. W. Zwiep, *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 1997), 131. (Some scholars question the authenticity of Mark 16:9–20, given that these verses are not contained in some of the oldest extant manuscripts.)

12. See Zwiep, *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology*.

13. For a more complete examination of the Ascension as a salvific act, see William Perez, "The Ascension of Jesus Christ: Its Role in Redemption from a Latter-day Saint Theological Perspective" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019).

14. *The Anti-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Allan Menzies (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), 402.

15. Arthur A. Just Jr. and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III (Luke)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 393.

16. "Elders' Journal, July 1838," 44, emphasis added, The Joseph Smith Papers.

17. D. Todd Christofferson, "3 Ways Joseph Smith Reveals Jesus Christ to Us," *New Era*, March 2020, 2.

18. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 3:365.

19. Dennis L. Largey et al., eds., *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 10.

20. See Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *The Belonging: The Atonement and Relationships with God and Family Heart* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 60.

21. Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 161.

22. Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 163–64.

23. Parley P. Pratt, "An Angel from on High," *Hymns*, no. 13.

24. Cecil Frances Alexander, "He Is Risen," *Hymns*, no. 199.

25. Farrow, *Ascension*, 28.

26. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Temples and Temple Work," *Ensign*, February 1982, 3.

27. Russell M. Nelson, "Endure and Be Lifted Up," *Ensign*, May 1997, 72; emphasis added.

28. "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]." p. 1754, The Joseph Smith Papers.

29. John Walsh, *Mormon Mysticism, Mythology, and Magic: Joseph Smith versus the Metaphysics of Nicene Christianity* (Missouri City, TX: iMormons at Smashwords, 2011), location 5115.
30. "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," 1971, The Joseph Smith Papers.
31. William W. Phelps, "Praise to the Man," *Hymns*, no. 27.
32. Truman G. Madsen, "The Temple and the Atonement," in *The Temple and the Atonement* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), scholarsarchive.byu.edu.
33. Daniel C. Peterson, "The Temple as a Place of Ascent to God" (address at 2009 FairMormon Conference), <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2009/the-temple-as-a-place-of-ascent-to-god>.
34. Walsh, *Mormon Mysticism, Mythology, and Magic*, location 2342.
35. James Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Fort Collins, CO: Delmarva Publications, 2015), s.v. "cloud."
36. The ascension recorded in the Book of Mormon does not replicate once again the same redemptive work effectuated by the Savior's initial ascension. However, there is value in noting that this key aspect of His glorious return to the Father was also demonstrated to the Nephites for their own benefit and so that they too could testify of an ascended Christ.
37. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 18:107.
38. Linda K. Burton, "We'll Ascend Together," *Ensign*, May 2015, 29.
39. Edward Partridge, "Let Zion in Her Beauty Rise," *Hymns*, no. 41.
40. "Elders' Journal, July 1838," 44, The Joseph Smith Papers.
41. Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 47.
42. Russell M. Nelson, "Why This Holy Land?," *Ensign*, December 1989, 15.
43. Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 159.
44. Alexander, "He Is Risen."