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Above: Exterior of the Church of the Ascension.

BY LYNN O. TRAYLOR

WHERE JESUS **ASCENDED**



IF ASKED TO NAME a major New Testament writing, you might think first of Paul's Letter to the Romans for its theological significance or John's Gospel with its emphasis on Jesus' divinity. However, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts should not be overlooked, for together they comprise about 30 percent of the entire New Testament, more than all of Paul's writings and John's Gospel. In the New Testament, Luke's Gospel is the longest book, and Acts is the third longest. Almost all modern scholars agree the same author wrote both books, so we naturally consider them together.¹ This tendency is strengthened when we consider the connection made at the ending of Luke (24:50-53) and the beginning of Acts (1:1-11) in the twice-told account of Jesus' ascension.

Or should we say "accounts" of Jesus' ascension? Such would almost seem to be the case, for the conclusion of Luke's Gospel states that Jesus led His disciples "out as far as Bethany" and "while He was blessing them, He left them and was carried up into heaven," after which the disciples "returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:50-52, HCSB). However, at the beginning of Acts, the ascension apparently took place on the Mount of Olives, for afterward the disciples "returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olive Grove" (Acts 1:12, HCSB). Was there more than one "ascension"? If not, where did Jesus' ascension take place?

If by "ascension" we are referring to Jesus' departure from earth to heaven, many scholars contend the differences between Luke's ascension descriptions do indeed point to more than one event, with the resurrected Jesus ascending to heaven, appearing from heaven during the 40 days mentioned in Acts, and then making a final departure.² Others uphold the existence of only one ascension, Jesus' resurrection and ascension being separated by the 40 days mentioned in Acts 1:3.³ A brief discussion of Luke's portrayal of the resurrection can aid us in understanding his view on Jesus' ascension as found in Luke-Acts.

Luke's description of the Lord's fellowship with the disciples at Emmaus (24:13-30) and His appearance to "the Eleven" at Jerusalem (24:36-43) clearly shows Jesus experienced a bodily resurrection. As the other Gospels likewise testify, however, the qualities of that resurrection body were not rigid or fixed. Jesus disappeared from the disciples' sight (v. 31) and just as suddenly stood among them (v. 36). On the one hand, He was subject to no physical boundaries—yet He ate in their presence and showed them His hands and feet (vv. 30-43). In both his Gospel and in Acts, Luke described Jesus' resurrection appearances before he described the ascension. A subtle but meaningful truth is being conveyed here, for in emphasizing the resurrection body and appearances, Luke called our attention to Jesus' lordship. For Luke (as well as the New Testament overall), the resurrection of Jesus validates that He is the Christ. Thus His lordship is not dependent on the ascension. Jesus' lordship was already a present reality for Luke, as shown in the disciples' new willingness after the resurrection (both in Luke's Gospel and in Acts) to proclaim Jesus "Lord" (Greek, *kurios*).⁴

At this point, one might well ask

how this discussion helps us answer the question as to where Jesus' ascension took place. Since for Luke, Jesus' lordship was established by His resurrection, it follows then that the ascension did not precede the resurrection appearances. So Jesus had only one "final departure," rather than two as some scholars would suggest.

Why then does Luke mention two locations for Jesus' ascension? A closer reading of Luke shows an earlier link between Bethany and the Mount of Olives as Jesus was preparing to enter Jerusalem (19:29). Luke tended to see Bethany and the Mount of Olives as one and the same for his purposes of the Gospel and of Acts. In the Gospel, Luke's telling of Jesus' ascension brought a closure to the Gospel, while in Acts it was the beginning of his story in relating the spread of the good news and the growth of the church.⁵ Put another way, Luke's Gospel shows what Jesus did and taught; Acts shows what He continues to do and teach. Thus the ascension stories of each serve to connect the ministry of Jesus with that of the church.⁶

Also the language of Luke 24:50 leaves room for interpretation, so that several modern translations simply read "He

led them out as far as Bethany." Again it seems Luke was willing to refer to Bethany, Bethphage, and the Mount of Olives as one geographical area according to his purposes.⁷ Possibly in Luke's mind, the "two locations" are not two,



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but one. This is even more plausible when we consider the actual distance between Bethany and the Mount of Olives. Taking the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, a traveler would come to Bethany, then cross over the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, and enter the city of Jerusalem.⁸ The distance between Bethany and the Mount of Olives is less than three miles.⁹

In the area of modern-day Jerusalem,

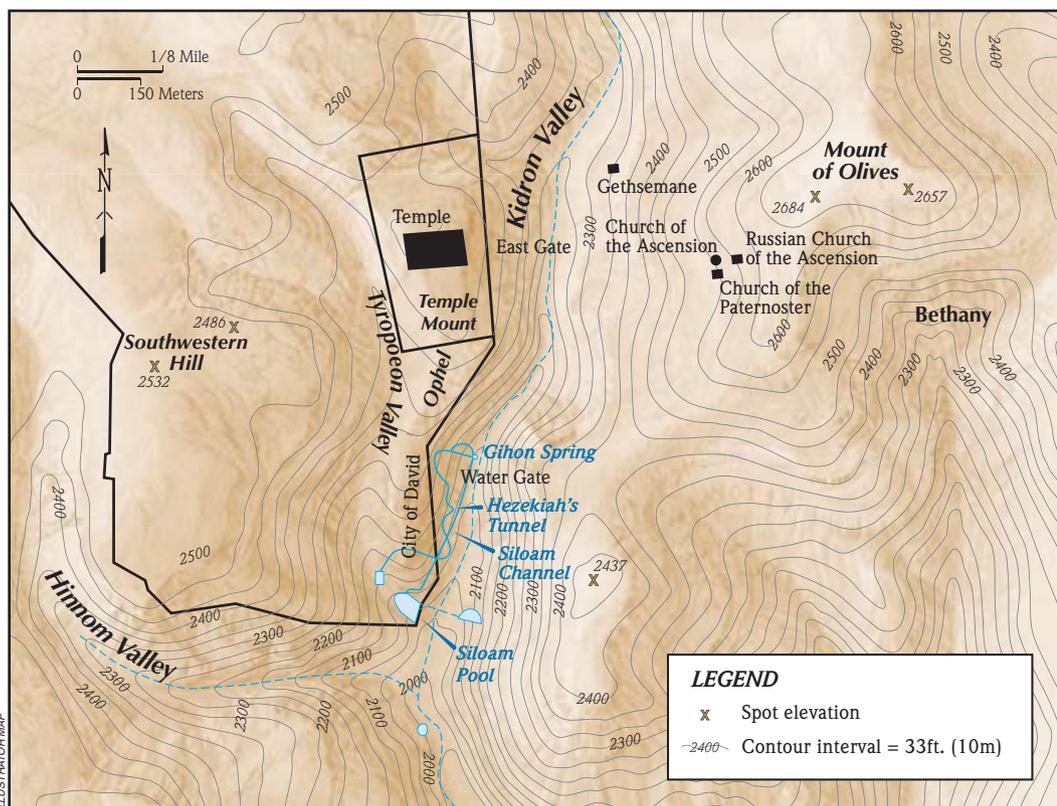
no less than three sites mark the event of Jesus' ascension: the Church of the Holy Ascension, located near the top of the Mount of Olives, the Paternoster Church, and the Russian Orthodox Church of the Ascension. In the chapel of the Church of the Holy Ascension, an indentation in a rock has been preserved as an imprint which, according to tradition, is a footprint Jesus left as He ascended into heaven! None of

these three sites correspond to the biblical description Luke gave.¹⁰ While the exact site of the ascension may never be known, according to Luke, that area of the Mount of Olives closest to Bethany is the most likely location for Jesus to have blessed the disciples (24:50), exhorting them and us to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8, HCSB). **B**

Left: Path to Bethany from Jerusalem. Leaving Jerusalem, Bethany was the first town on the road to Jericho.

Lower right: In the Church of the Holy Ascension, which some claim to be the spot from which Jesus ascended into heaven, is an indentation in stone that some believe to be Jesus' footprint.

Below: Village of Bethany on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives.



ILLUSTRATOR MAP



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1. John B. Polhill, "Acts" in *The New American Commentary*, David Dockery, ed., vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 23.
2. John F. Maile, "The Ascension in Luke-Acts," *Tyndale Bulletin* 37 (1986): 38.
3. R. F. O'Toole, "Luke's Understanding of Jesus' Resurrection-Ascension-Exaltation," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 9.3 (July, 1979): 110.
4. Maile, 45.
5. Mideal C. Parsons, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 194.
6. Maile, 55.
7. Peter Atkins, "Luke's Ascension Location—A Note on Luke 24:50," *The Expository Times* 109 (April 1998): 206.
8. J. McKee Adams, *Biblical Backgrounds*, revised by Joseph A. Callaway (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1065), 68.
9. *Ibid.*, map 11.
10. "Mount of Olives" [online, cited 15 March 2005]. Available from Internet: www.BiblePlaces.com/mt_olives.

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LESSON REFERENCE
FBS: Luke 24:1-53; Acts 1