

NSBT NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Exalted Above the Heavens

The risen and ascended Christ



Peter C. Orr

Series Editor: D. A. Carson

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*To Philip and Kay
For everything*

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Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: (1) the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); (2) the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and (3) the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

This is an unusual book, in at least three ways. First, it addresses a set of questions over which there is considerable confusion. How does the risen and exalted Christ make himself present in his people, or to his people? Does he so come by the Spirit that the Spirit and the exalted Christ are one and the same? If not, where do the differences lie? How do we rightly speak of Christ 'away' from us in 'heaven', yet with his people and in his people to the end of the age? Second, the questions it addresses constitute a rather unusual approach to biblical theology. Peter Orr's work focuses neither on the theology of an individual book or corpus, nor on a strand or trajectory that runs right through Scripture. Rather, it focuses on what he calls a 'sub-epoch', the period from Christ's ascension to his return, and happily explores many biblical texts to think through what we are told about Christ and his relationships during this time. And third, instead of addressing these questions using the synthetic and analytic categories of systematic theology, Dr Orr largely confines himself to the categories deployed by the biblical writers themselves.

Written with verve and clarity, this book promises not only to bring sharper thinking to a rather confused domain of Christology, but also to invite us to deeper adoration as we contemplate overlooked characteristics of our triune God.

D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Author's preface

There are many people to whom I am very thankful for their help and support during the writing of this book. First and foremost, my sincere thanks to the governing board of Moore Theological College for granting me six months of study leave to work on this volume.

Thank you to everyone at SPCK/IVP, especially to senior commissioning editor Philip Duce for his help during the writing process, and to NSBT series editor Don Carson for his input and for agreeing to include this book in the series. Many thanks as well to Eldo Barkhuizen for his very capable copy-editing.

Two people in particular have had a profound impact on my theological formation: Mark Thompson and Peter O'Brien. I would like to thank Mark – friend, colleague and principal of Moore College – for his unfailingly kind support and warm friendship over many years and particularly his encouragement during this period of writing. I am also very grateful to the Lord for Peter and his friendship, mentoring and godly Christian example over many years. This study had its genesis in a final-year project that Peter patiently supervised.

My colleagues on the faculty have been a wonderful support during this project in different ways. I want especially to thank my friends and colleagues in the New Testament department – Lionel Windsor, Will Timmins, Pete Tong and Philip Kern. Philip as well as being a good friend, colleague and department head is a wonderful model of godly, careful teaching. Thanks too to Simon Gillham, Chase Kuhn and Dan Wu for their friendship and frequent encouragement while I wrote this book.

Portions of this book have appeared in expanded form in my earlier work *Christ Absent and Present* published by Mohr Siebeck Tübingen in their WUNT series. I am extremely thankful to Mohr Siebeck for granting me the permission to reuse this material in its current form.

A number of people have very kindly read portions of this book or helped with its production in other ways. Thank you to Andrew Court, Jack Hamer, Kate Hamer, Pat O'Keeffe, Paul Searle, Andrew West, Mark Woodhouse and Paul Young. Thanks to the students of Moore College for their encouragement while

writing – particularly the lunch-time cricketers.

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Thank you to my family; to my sister Susannah Orr for her love and support; to my sons Ben, Ollie, Jonny and Daniel for helping me to take my mind off writing as we read stories, played basketball, watched water polo and listened to podcasts about exploding whales. I pray that you will understand the content of this book one day. To my wife, Emma: there is not enough space to write everything for which I am thankful to the delight of my life.

Finally, to the dedicatees of this book my mum and dad. Thank you for everything. I hope this one is more readable.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Peter Orr

Sydney

Abbreviations

AB – Anchor Bible

AcT – *Acta Theologica*

AGJU – Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums

AnBib – *Analecta biblica*

ArBib – The Aramaic Bible

AUSS – *Andrews University Seminary Studies*

AV – Authorized (King James) Version

BBR – *Bulletin for Biblical Research*

BDAG – W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d edn, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999

BECNT – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

BI – *Biblical Illustrator*

Bib – *Biblica*

BNTC – Black's New Testament Commentaries

BTB – *Biblical Theology Bulletin*

BTCP – The Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation Commentary Series

BZ – *Biblische Zeitschrift*

BZNW – Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft

CBQ – *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*

ESV – English Standard Version

ETL – *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses*

FAT – Forschungen zum Alten Testament

FRLANT – Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments

HCSB – Holman Christian Standard Bible

HTKNT – Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament

HTR – *Harvard Theological Review*

HUT – Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie

ICC – International Critical Commentary

IJST – *International Journal of Systematic Theology*

Int – *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*

JBL – *Journal of Biblical Literature*
JCTS – *Jewish and Christian Text Series*
JETS – *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JSNT – *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup – Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JSOTSup – Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JTS – *Journal of Theological Studies*
KEK – Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer-Kommentar)
LNTS – Library of New Testament Studies
LXX – Septuagint
MT – Masoretic Text
NASB – New American Standard Bible
NICNT – New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC – New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV – New International Version (2011)
NovT – *Novum Testamentum*
NovTSup – Novum Testamentum Supplements
NRSV – New Revised Standard Version
NSBT – New Studies in Biblical Theology
NT – New Testament
NTA – New Testament Abstracts
NTL – New Testament Library
NTOA – Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus
NTS – *New Testament Studies*
OT – Old Testament
PL – Patrologia latina [= Patrologiae cursus completus: Series latina]. Edited by J.-P. Migne, 217 vols., Paris, 1844–64
PNTC – Pillar New Testament Commentaries
RB – *Revue biblique*
RSR – *Recherches de science religieuse*
RSV – Revised Standard Version
RTR – *Reformed Theological Review*
SBLDS – Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBT – Studies in Biblical Theology
SNTSMS – Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP – Sacra pagina

SUNT – Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments

SwJT – *Southwestern Journal of Theology*

TDNT – *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, translated by John T. Willis et al., 8 vols., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006

T. Levi – *Testament of Levi*

tr. – Translation, translated by

TynB – *Tyndale Bulletin*

WBC – Word Biblical Commentary

WUNT – Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

ZECNT – Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

ZNW – *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*

Chapter One

Introduction

Why this book?

This is a book about Jesus as he is now. In some ways, then, it is an extended application of and meditation on Colossians 3:1–2: ‘If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.’^[1]

Generally speaking, Christians have tended to focus their attention on what Jesus *has* done (his life, death and resurrection) and what he *will* do (return and reign). And while there has been something of a revival in the study of Jesus’ ascension,^[2] there is a tendency to consider Christ’s exalted state simply in relation to the events of his ascension or his parousia. Studies that consider Jesus in his exalted state are relatively rare. However, the Christ that Christians trust in, relate to and love is the Christ who not only lived, died, rose and will come again but also is presently at God’s right hand. Christian faith as well as Christian theological reflection must take into consideration this significant aspect of Christ’s identity.

This book, then, is a study on the exalted Christ. For our purposes, we will consider his ‘exaltation’ to be the process by which, as John puts it, Jesus departed ‘out of the world’ (John 13:1). Generally NT authors focus on the resurrection and the ascension as the events that bring Jesus into his exalted state, though John actually sees the crucifixion as the essence of Jesus’ exaltation (e.g. John 3:14). The exalted Christ, then, is Jesus as he is following his exaltation and before his return.

This book and biblical theology

Considering the exalted Christ – his identity, his location and his activity – may seem to be a subject more obviously suited to systematic theology rather than biblical theology. However, apart from the ongoing need to show the interconnectedness of these two disciplines, considering the temporal structure

of the Bible's revelation helps us to see the relevance of this topic in a series devoted to biblical theology.

There are as many proposed 'structures' of the Bible as there are biblical theologians. Graeme Goldsworthy, building on the earlier work of Donald Robinson and Gabriel Hebert, has popularized the schema that is now associated with Moore College.³ He argues that the organizing principle of the Bible is the 'kingdom of God', and divides the Bible into four main epochs, which each provides development in the revelation of the kingdom of God: the kingdom of God revealed in Israel's prehistory (Gen. 1 – 11);⁴ the kingdom of God revealed in Israel's history (Abraham to Solomon); the kingdom of God revealed in prophetic eschatology (Solomon to the end of exile); and the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ (the NT).

Goldsworthy further subdivides this final epoch into three aspects:⁵

- (1) What Jesus did *for* us in the past, historical gospel event in fulfilment of the promises of the Old Testament.
- (2) What the word of Jesus and his Spirit go on doing *in* us as we live in the present our life of faith and in the world as the gospel is proclaimed.
- (3) What the end-time consummation *with* us will be when Jesus returns in glory to judge the living and the dead and to bring in the fullness of his kingdom.

Whether or not we accept Goldsworthy's overall structure, this delineation of the New Testament era helpfully distinguishes the different aspects of Christ's work for us. However, in this schema there is a subtle tendency to downplay the *ongoing* significance of Jesus. Whereas in points 1 and 3 Jesus is presented actively ('what Jesus *did* for us' and 'Jesus *returns*'), in point 2 the Spirit and Jesus' '*word*' are presented as the active agents.

Certainly the NT affirms the work of the Spirit (e.g. Rom. 8:14) and the power of Jesus' word (e.g. Acts 6:7); however, it also affirms that Jesus himself *remains* active. For example, he intercedes (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25), he enables Christians to persevere (Rom. 14:4; 1 Cor. 1:7–8) and he continues to speak through his apostles (2 Cor. 13:3). Yes, the focus of the NT is on the past (and future) work of Christ but it is by no means silent on his present work.

Further, Goldsworthy's scheme implies that this is a period of Christ's absence. However, the picture across the New Testament is more complicated than simply saying that Jesus leaves and the Spirit comes. For a start, what are we to make of Jesus' famous promise in the great commission, '[B]ehold, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matt. 28:20)? This age is fundamentally the age of the *presence* of Jesus. Again, as he concludes his high-priestly prayer

in John 17, Jesus expresses the desire that the love the Father has for him may be in the disciples, and that he himself ‘may be in them’ (17:26). Even though Jesus is leaving and sending the Spirit, he himself will ‘be in them’.

However, in the same prayer Jesus affirms that he is ‘no longer in the world’ even while believers ‘are in the world’ (17:11). There appears, then, to be something of a tension between the absence and presence of Christ. So, in 2 Corinthians, Paul can state that ‘while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord’ (2 Cor. 5:6; cf. 5:8) and he can remind the Corinthians in the same letter that Christ ‘is powerful among you’ (13:3). One of the questions this book will focus on, then, is how we are to think of this period in redemptive history between Jesus’ ascension and his return. In this period what is the relationship between Christ’s absence and his presence? If anything, in theological reflection on this question, there is an emphasis on the ongoing *presence* of Christ. So, König is typical when he states that ‘Christ has not gone away, and his work on earth has not been interrupted. He continues it without break.’⁶ Or Beverly Gaventa who suggests that ‘Jesus’ ascension does not mean his absence; it simply means that his presence is no longer constrained by place and time’.⁷ We will see that these suggestions overlook important strands of NT data which indicate that Christ’s absence is more Christologically significant particularly as it relates to his ongoing humanity.

But perhaps the most fundamental question this volume will consider is in what sense, if any, the exaltation of Christ affects his identity. When, for example, Peter affirms that following the resurrection (and ascension), God has ‘made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified’ (Acts 2:36), what exactly does he mean? Does Christ’s exaltation merely reveal his lordship and messianic identity, or does he enter into them in a fuller way following his exaltation?

As such, this book will attend to this somewhat neglected sub-epoch of biblical theology in considering what we can say about Jesus in the present, as the exalted Christ, and so what it means to ‘set our minds’ on Christ as he is seated at God’s right hand.

[The plan of this book](#)

This book will examine the exalted Christ through the lenses of his identity (chapters 2–4), his location (chapters 5–8) and his activity (chapters 9–10). In terms of his identity, chapter 2 considers the relationship between the ‘earthly

Jesus' and the 'exalted Christ' across the NT, and will particularly consider the question of how the resurrection and ascension affect (if at all) his identity. Chapters 3 and 4 will treat the exalted Christ's relationship to the Spirit and to the church and will consider arguments that have effectively collapsed Christ into either the Spirit or the church. In considering his location, chapter 5 looks at the relationship between Christ's exaltation and his absence. Chapters 6 and 7 attend more closely to the relationship between Christ's absence and his continuing possession of a discrete, individual, localizable human body. For Paul, in particular, Christ's absence is a bodily absence. In chapter 8 we examine the presence of Christ by examining one of the most important sections in the NT to deal with Christ's ongoing presence: 2 Corinthians 2 – 4. Here we will see that Christ's presence is both mediated and *epiphanic*; that is, Christ is essentially *made* present. Although this is an essentially passive mode of presence, we will see that this is by no means weak or ineffectual. The final section on the activity of Christ (chapters 9 and 10) is related to chapter 8 in that it portrays Christ's active presence; that is, where he is presented as an agent. In chapter 9 we look at Christ's mediated activity on earth, while in chapter 10 we examine his activity in heaven as he responds to prayer and intercedes for believers. In the final chapter I offer a brief summary and some theological and pastoral reflections.