

## Icons of The Ascension

### Reflection

I invite you to consider an icon of the Ascension, and to then use that knowledge to inform and grow your own understanding of, and relationship with God.

The icon is taken from the Rabbula Gospels and named after the scribe that completed the work. It is a Syriac gospel famed for its illustrations, which includes this depiction of the Ascension. Rabbula was from the Monastery of St John in Beth Sagba, 586 A.D.



Icons can be helpful in gaining an understanding of Scripture. A friend once described them to me as a window into heaven helping us understand something more clearly or gaining an understanding on something that previously confused us. An icon is not painted or drawn but written. Whilst an initial glimpse may reveal a picture of a specific event, with closer observation we may see that other scriptures are also written in, thus revealing a full picture of the whole story of God to the reader.

If three of us read a book and then gave an account of it, we would present three different accounts of that book and so it is with icons. What I see may not be what you see. Each reader reads the icon with their own personality, knowledge and understanding. Whilst remaining open to all God reveals through the icon. What I have put here are common reflections on the image with a few of my own points. Of course, you may see something different. I hope you enjoy the reading.

Lord open our minds that we may see you more clearly, love you more dearly, follow you more nearly, this and everyday...

JESUS. The focus of the icon is on Jesus, the figure in white revealed within the traditional mandorla – the shape that surrounds the image. Mandorla's are usually almond or circular shape and often portrayed as an area of light, reflecting a Holy image. I notice the mandorla in this icon has a light surround with a blue background. Traditionally iconographers use blue as the colour of heaven. (The belief was that Heaven was above the earth, when they looked up they saw blue, so blue became the colour of heaven.) The heavenly throne was also often portrayed in blue. This mandorla, blue with the light surround, does not leave us in any doubt about the heavenly significance of this figure, however it is also affirmed by two angels either side of Jesus.

There are a further two angels below the first two. These both hold a crown in a cloth. The crowns would usually signify Kingship so maybe here we see a crowning of the King as he returns to his heavenly throne.

As we draw in closer to Jesus, we can see that in his left-hand he's holding a scroll. This is associated with scripture and knowledge. So here Jesus holds all of the knowledge. It may take our mind back to the words of the disciples in John 16 when they proclaim '*now we can see that you know all things.*' Jesus's right-hand is held in blessing. I find this part of the image quite powerful; Jesus did not depart after giving a blessing but whilst he was giving the blessing. I haven't really thought of that before or indeed of the significance. To give a blessing and then leave may imply 'thank you very much you are on your own now. But to leave as he gives the blessing, signifies a continuation as one commentator put it "a uniting bond" between Jesus and the disciples - not I was with you but now I'm gone, but 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20)

The writer of this icon is making it clear to us that this is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, the Son of God. Directly below the mandorla are depictions taken from the book of Ezekiel. We see four faces, four wings and wheels. An even closer inspection will show us 'the hand of God'. The hand of God allowed Ezekiel to go to the place where he could see "the glory of the Lord." The artist is writing in Gods story before Christ came and lived among us, and showing the continuation through Gods son Jesus Christ. He reveals the hand of God is now available to guide Jesus's disciples into heaven.

MARY. Scriptures do not tell us Mary was present at the Ascension however in the centre of the lower part of the Icon, we can clearly see Mary is depicted. She is dressed in blue, as is usual in iconography (The colour of heaven remember) Her head is surrounded by a halo, as are all heavenly beings in the icon. Clearly the artist has given her a place of importance, centre of the picture and directly below Jesus. For me there is even more revealed through Mary; her presents reminds me that Jesus Christ was both wholly human and wholly God, through Mary he came to dwell as one amongst us. This is confirmed by her presence. In this Icon she has a very feminine body, her open arms lifted up to the heavens - maybe in worship to God, and yet her open body posture as she faces out to the world reminds me of the way a mother may hold open arms when she sees her child in the distance. Almost bidding the reader to come into the icon and into Gods Kingdom. Through Mary this ordinary person, came the extraordinary and that has to have relevance today. Not least when I wonder "who will do your work Lord?" and maybe speaks even more personally when I have those "why choose me" times. Mary in this icon gives me hope for this age and all to come.

DISCIPLES. The disciples' presence, like Mary depicts the church, the body of Christ, being established here on earth. It is interesting that St Paul who wasn't at the Ascension is present in the icon. He is seen on the left holding a book. Again, his presence confirms the representation of the church being established on earth. It also adds a timeless element to the story the icon is depicting. Entry to heaven was not just for the time of the Ascension and for the disciples present, but is for all who follow in the way of Jesus Christ. Looking on the other side of Mary, we can easily depict St Peter, he is often known as the holder of the keys. (Matthew 16:19 <sup>19</sup>*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*) Peter is also carrying a cross, a representation of the way he was to be martyred. Peter the rock. Peter the one who did "deny himself and take up his cross" (Luke 9:23) I find Peter's presence reassuring; here is the rock, here is the strength, here is the uneducated fisherman who knew Jesus and followed him from the day he met him. Here is the man who in fear denied knowing Jesus and yet through such strong faith was able to overcome that fear and proclaimed the gospel even unto death on a cross. Here are the beginnings of the Church, a beginning with foundations built on rock.

ANGELS. On each side of Mary, there are two angels. They look a little like they're holding wands, as in Harry Potter style! But of course, people of the day wouldn't know Harry Potter. The staff or wand is not uncommon in iconography, it depicts authority. The two angels are facing the disciples. They represent the angels (two men dressed in white) in the Acts version of the Ascension who asked the disciples why they were looking into the sky and told them that Jesus will return the same way he entered heaven.

SUN AND MOON Tucked away at the top on the right and hand left-hand side we can make out the sun and moon. I wonder if this represents the return of Christ, in the second coming when both are darkened in comparison to the light of the Lord. Or maybe they signify time, drawing our mind to link together that which is passed and that which is to come.

CONCLUSION. When I read this icon, I see a depiction of the Ascension. I understand that this was the time, the moment, when Jesus was to return to his rightful throne in heaven. It was the moment where, what we know of the established church began. This moment came about after centuries of people trying to follow God and failing. I'm reminded that old prophets had tried to tell of God's desire to be worshiped. But when this didn't happen, in an act of unfailing love, God's very self, got up close and personal. By being born and living amongst us he began to build his church, so that all of humankind can know that love first comes from God, can know that we love because God first loved us. We recognise the depth of that Love because Jesus wholly man, wholly divine, was prepared to die, even on the cross so that each one of us may find our way into glory and be with him in his father's house where he reigns. I read this icon and I am reminded that I too may be in heaven with Christ my Saviour. I'm reminded that Jesus is the way into heaven and I tread in the footsteps of the saints have gone before. I am reminded that I stand on holy ground.

Now you have read this icon, What do you see? What speaks to you? What is your understanding?

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