


# Two Accounts – One Ascension: Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:9-11

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**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates the ascension accounts (Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:9-11) in a narrative way. The main analysis point will be the question: why is one event recounted twice: at the end of the first Lukan volume and the beginning of the second? The second question concerns the meaning of the discrepancies between the two pericopes. We argue that all differences can be explained by Luke's literary and narrative strategy. Luke 24:50-53 recounts the recognition of Jesus. Acts 1:9-11 marks the end of the period (between resurrection and ascension) needed for the disciples to become the legitimate and authoritative successors of Jesus.

**KEYWORDS:** ascension, Luke 24:50-53, Acts 1:9-11, narrative analysis

Luke the Evangelist is the only NT author who wrote an account of Jesus' ascension. In fact, he did so twice. Ever since no one has ever fully answered the question: why there is one event recounted twice? The history of exegetical studies on ascension abounds in many monographs,<sup>1</sup> but the narrative analysis is still missing. Robert F. O'Toole stated in 1979: "The methodology used by most researchers seems too limited. They spend a good deal of time discussing Luke's treatment of the ascension and exaltation, but they do not study

<sup>1</sup> Victoriano C. Larrañaga (*L'Ascension de Notre-Seigneur dans la Nouveau Testament* [SPIB 50; Rome: IBP 1938]) was the first scholar who responded to theories proposed by David F. Strauss, Adolf von Harnack in his ample dissertation. He was an apologist of conformity between the two accounts. A significant contribution to the debate was provided by Gerhard Lohfink (*Die Himmelfahrt Jesu. Untersuchungen zu den Himmelfahrts- und Erhöhungstexten bei Lukas* [SANT 26; München: Kösel 1971]), who in his doctoral dissertation examined ascension from *religionsgeschichtliches* and *redaktionsgeschichtliches* aspect. Mikael C. Parsons (*The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts. The Ascension Narratives in Context* [JSNTSup 21; Sheffield: JSOT 1987]) examined two texts through both synchronic and diachronic methods. His main conclusion is that discrepancies between two accounts can be most adequately explained not in terms of interpolation or source theories but in the light of their literary function. Arie W. Zwiep (*The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology* [NovTSup 87; Leiden: Brill 1997]) examined in his monography the Jewish background of ascension accounts. Other recent studies include M. Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* (SNTSMS 146; Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2009); J.A. Mihoc, *The Ascension of Jesus Christ – A Critical and Exegetical Study of the Ascension in Luke-Acts and in the Jewish and Christian Context* (Diss. Durham University; Durham 2010); A.W. Zwiep, "The Text of the Ascension Narratives: Luke 24,50-53: Acts 1,1-2, 9–11", *Christ, the Spirit and the Community of God. Essays on the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. A.W. Zwiep) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2010) 7–37; D.K. Bryan – D.W. Pao (eds.), *Ascent into Heaven in Luke-Acts. New Explorations of Luke's Narrative Hinge* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2016).

these two events in Luke-Acts as a whole.”<sup>2</sup> Matthew Sleeman claims that this opinion has retained his validity until now<sup>3</sup> and states: “Jesus’ ascension in Acts not only happens within the narrative, it also structures it.”<sup>4</sup> In 2010, François Bovon published a short article on the topic of ascension. At the end of the paper, this great authority on NT studies recounts a small anecdote: “French students in Montpellier (France) told me recently that there is an approach missing in my survey, the narratological one. I could only accept their remark. Questions such as, What is the implied author’s point of view? Or what is the construction of Jesus’ and the disciples’ characters? have thus far not been asked. And they are legitimate questions.”<sup>5</sup> It is striking how much effort was put into investigating what is hidden beyond the text of ascension and how little attention was paid to the text itself and how it works within the Lucan narrative. This paper argues that all minor and major discrepancies between the two accounts are caused by Luke’s literary and narrative concepts. Our position is that he has different purposes in writing the Gospel and Acts. That difference affects the modulation of ascension pericopes. Why is one story recounted twice? Why has Luke chosen particularly the ascension (and not the resurrection, for example) in interlacing the two volumes of his work? These are the guiding questions. The recent development of narrative criticism in biblical scholarship encourages reviewing ascension accounts again with some new tools at hand.

## 1. Narrative Comparison of Ascension Accounts

The important factor to consider is the very place where the two stories are put together. All the differences are significant, so we should carefully ponder which discrepancies are caused by the inclusion of the opening of Jerusalem’s ministry and which are put into the text because they form a final stage of the development of the plot in chapter 24. We should not overlook the references to the Gospel in Acts 1:9-11. Firstly, we will elucidate the divergences between the two accounts. Then we will try to answer why some elements occur in the first and not in the second pericope and why the author chooses other motifs to tie the stories. These questions will be answered from a narrative perspective.

First, we dismiss the theories that claim that two ascension accounts describe two different events.<sup>6</sup> If this is a correct interpretation, we should also consider other pericopes from the prologue in the same way. Talbert presents five plausible theories which explain the repetition of the event:<sup>7</sup> 1) the author gained more information during the process of writing;

2 R.F. O’Toole, “Luke’s Understanding of Jesus’ Resurrection-Ascension-Exaltation,” *BTB* 9/3 (1979) 113.

3 Sleeman, *Geography*, 30.

4 Sleeman, *Geography*, 236.

5 F. Bovon, “The Lukan Ascension Stories,” *Korean New Testament Studies* 17 (2010) 589–590.

6 See a brief summary in I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC 3; Exeter: Paternoster 1978) 907.

7 C.H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts* (SBLMS 20; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press 1974) 59.

2) the two-tradition hypothesis; 3) interpolation; 4) theological reasons; 5) “Lukan architecture” of the narrative. The fifth explanation is the object of our study.

It is very hard to understand how many scholars (even mindful of the narrative aspects of the text) claim that the ascension scene in Acts presents a more detailed account.<sup>8</sup> Daniel Marguerat argues that we have new elements in Acts: the cloud, the two men and the discourse. Justin A. Mihoc states: “the most obvious differences between Luke and Acts are the omissions (in Luke) and the additions (in Acts).”<sup>9</sup> Luke 24:50-53 also contains different elements: the walk to Bethany, the blessing and the prostration. So how should we differentiate omissions and additions? Both accounts have their particularities. We will offer a narrative analysis of the two accounts respecting their contexts and literary genres.<sup>10</sup> To stress Hans W. Frei’s principle: “the narrative is the meaning.”<sup>11</sup> We will proceed by using the standard narrative tools of analysis:<sup>12</sup>

#### a) Plot

Luke 24:50-53 forms a plot, and Acts 1:9-11 does not. Although the ascension in Luke encompasses only four verses, many deeds are described in the account in a very sober way. The narrative is very dense, which explains why it is difficult to see a classical plot pattern in this episode. However, Marguerat, in his manual, exemplifies this pattern in an even shorter narrative unit of Matt 8:14-15.<sup>13</sup> Usually, the plot encompasses longer units as a chapter, but the main plot can also contain smaller plots. The main plot of Luke 24 ends with the scene in 24:50-53, which contains its own own combined micro-plot<sup>14</sup>: it is not only a plot of resolution but also of revelation, which is more character-centred in general.<sup>15</sup> One can also see the structure of imbalance/balance or incompleteness/completeness.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> D. Marguerat, *Gli Atti degli apostoli*. I. (1–12) (Bologna: EDB 2011) 50.

<sup>9</sup> Mihoc, *Ascension*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> We are not interested in any oral or rhetorical theories connecting the end of the Gospel with the beginning of Acts. See A. García Serrano, *The Presentation in the Temple. The Narrative Function of Lk 2:22-39 in Luke-Acts* (AnBib 197; Roma: GBPress 2016) 303, where the author presents the concentric structure with the praise in the temple (Luke 24:52-53) in the middle. There are, of course, references to the beginning of Acts, but the connection between Luke 24 and the prologue of Acts is more complex.

<sup>11</sup> H.W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1974) 270.

<sup>12</sup> Cf.: J.-N. Aletti, *Il racconto come teologia. Studio narrativo del terzo Vangelo e del libro degli Atti degli Apostoli* (Bologna: EDB 2009) 226–230; D. Marguerat – Y. van Bourquin, *Per leggere i racconti biblici* (Roma: Borla 2011) 158–161.

<sup>13</sup> Marguerat – Bourquin, *Per leggere*, 50–51. The authors see in this passage a model example of “*schema quinario*”: exposition (8,14a); complication (8,14b); transformative action (8,15a); resolution (8,15b); final situation (8,15c).

<sup>14</sup> The moments of this plot: 1) inciting moment: v. 50a – Ἐξήγαγεν δὲ αὐτοὺς ἔξω ἕως πρὸς Βηθανίαν; 2) transformative action: vv. 50b-51 – καὶ ἐπάρας τὰς χεῖρας αὐτοῦ εὐλόγησεν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ εὐλογεῖν αὐτὸν αὐτοὺς διέσπεν ἀπ’ αὐτῶν καὶ ἀνεφέρετο εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν; 3) resolution: v. 52a – Καὶ αὐτοὶ προσκυνήσαντες αὐτόν; 4) final situation: vv. 52b-53 – ὑπέστρεψαν εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ μετὰ χαρᾶς μεγάλης καὶ ἦσαν διὰ παντὸς ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ εὐλογοῦντες τὸν θεόν.

<sup>15</sup> J.L. Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us* (SubBi 13; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico 2000) 18.

<sup>16</sup> R.C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (SBLMS 3; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press 1976) 70.

In the first account, there is a change in the narration time: in the middle section, the action is slowing down, underscoring the importance of the event (vv. 50b-51).

The three verses in Acts 1:9-11 form a very dense narrative, and only a few exegetes proposed a division of this pericope. We divide it into three parts:

- I. v. 9: the ascension – this verse is a complete description of the event;
- II. v. 10: the setting of the discourse – the narrator introduces new characters and the context of the speech;
- III. v. 11: discourse – which presents the interpretation of the ascension.<sup>17</sup>

There is no plot in Acts 1:9-11. The narration time is close to the narrated time. Acts 1:10 is the first moment in the prologue (Acts 1:1-15) when the narration strategy changes and the *showing* is used. After a speech, the summary in vv. 12-14 is another instance of *showing*.

#### b) Time

This issue raised a long discussion in the scholarship.<sup>18</sup> Above all, it is to say that neither pericope gives a clear indication of the time of ascension. It opens the space for the question we will deal with in the next point when we ask why the narrator avoids giving concrete data for the event? And what is the influence of the preceding or following time references in the pericopes?

#### c) Place

“Places such as cities, villages, rivers, streams, wells, mountains or forests are mentioned frequently. These are usually mentioned as an integral part of the plot of the narratives.”<sup>19</sup> The main question of v. 50 is: why did they leave Jerusalem? The narrator did not mention Bethpage or the Mount of Olives; why did he choose Bethany?<sup>20</sup> Considering the statement of D. Francois Tolmie: what is the contribution of *locus dramatis* to the plot?

Why did they leave Jerusalem in 24:50 to separate themselves? In Luke 24:50-53, Jesus treats Jerusalem in the same way as previously: it is a place of non-recognition, so the final recognition is elsewhere. In the ascension account, disciples recognize the Lordship of Jesus

17 Lohfink (*Himmelfahrt*, 158) divides the scene into: ascension, v. 9 and *Engelszene*, vv. 10-11. G. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte*. I. *Einleitung. Kommentar zu Kapitel 1,1 – 8,40* (HThKNT 1; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder 1980) 204, calls vv. 10-11 a unity.

18 See the summary in Zwiep, *Ascension*, 186–192.

19 D.F. Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narrative. A Practical Guide* (Atlanta, GA: International Scholars Publications 1998) 107.

20 François Bovon (*Luke 3. A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28–24:53* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2012] 410) explains the issue considering two accounts of ascension in Luke and Acts together. The Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12) gives a good explanation according to French exegete (which is the topic of Parousia associated with this hill). However, this solution gives only a partial answer to our questions. It does not explain why the narrator chose Bethany instead of the Mount of Olives or Bethpage. In Luke 24:50-53, it is very difficult to find any allusion to Parousia. So, the second question still remains: why did the narrator choose Bethany? Bovon's explanation: “Luke is simply concerned to use different expressions” does not reflect the author's awareness of the geography.

by the act of prostration. Moreover, Bethany resembles the joyful entrance to the temple in recognition of Jesus' kingship by the disciples (19:29-46). In this way, the contrast is evident: the disciples recognized the divinity of Jesus in Bethany and *not* in Jerusalem, which overlooked the time of its visitation. Bethany occurs only once before in Luke 19:29. Luke does not make the same use of traditional data in the scene of entry to Jerusalem as other synoptists.<sup>21</sup> Every synoptic Gospel mentions Bethpage and Bethany before the entrance (except for Matthew). Only Luke does not reference Bethany after the entrance before 24:50. For Matthew and Mark, Bethany is where Jesus spends the night (Matt 21:17; Mark 11:11-12) and where he was anointed (Matt 21:6; Mark 14:3). Luke mentions only the Mount of Olives and the temple as places of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem (Luke does not recount any exit from or entry to Jerusalem).<sup>22</sup> In this perspective, the reader associates Bethany only with the glorious moment in 19:29. According to the standard division of the third Gospel,<sup>23</sup> Luke 19:29 begins the new section, which ends in 21:38. However, the Jerusalem ministry (19:29–21:38), the Passion narrative (22:1–23:56) and the resurrection narrative (24:1-53) centre around Jerusalem.

There are more similarities between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and ascension than most scholars are willing to admit. In both cases, Jesus leads the way.<sup>24</sup> First, he and his disciples reach Bethany, and then they go to Jerusalem and to the temple. In the instance of the ascension, there are only disciples who return to the city. The second difference is that the entry to Jerusalem is mentioned explicitly. Nevertheless, the geography of the accounts is the same. Moreover, the attitude of the disciples<sup>25</sup> is almost entirely similar (noteworthy, verse 19:37 occurs only in the Lukan version):

19:37 τὸ πλῆθος τῶν μαθητῶν χαίροντες αἰνεῖν τὸν θεὸν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ	24:52 μετὰ χαρᾶς μεγάλης
19:38 εὐλογημένος ὁ ἐρχόμενος	24:53 (αἰνοῦντες καὶ) εὐλογοῦντες τὸν θεόν

<sup>21</sup> G.R. Lanier, "Luke's Distinctive Use of the Temple. Portraying the Divine Visitation," *JTS* 65/2 (2014) 444.

<sup>22</sup> "Luca non parla di Gerusalemme: i due poli dello spazio occupato da Gesù sono il monte degli Ulivi (la notte) e il tempio (il giorno)." (J.-N. Aletti, *Il Gesù di Luca* [Bologna: EDB 2012] 138).

<sup>23</sup> Infancy narrative (1:4–2:52), ministry preparation (3:1–4:13), Galilean ministry (4:14–9:50), travel narrative (9:51–19:28), Jerusalem ministry (19:29–21:38), passion narrative (22:1–23:56), resurrection narrative (24:1-53).

<sup>24</sup> Parsons (*Departure*, 103–106) is very aware of the connection between both scenes. He notes that the setting, the cast of characters and the action are basically the same – the lack of Pharisees removes their conflict with Jesus. P. Atkins, "Luke's Ascension Location. A Note on Luke 24:50," *ExpTim* 109 (1997–1998) 205: "By showing that the departure and blessing of the disciples was at the same place as the entry into Jerusalem, Luke crowns the triumphal entry with the triumphal exit of Christ." Comparing triumphal entry with ascension as a triumphal exit, Atkins and Parsons go too far, in my opinion. It is a kind of "eisegesis," as John Nolland (*Luke 18,35–24,53* [WBC 35B; Dallas, TX: Word Books 1993] 1227) states.

<sup>25</sup> In 19:37, there is a multitude of disciples. The ascension participants included the group of Eleven, two disciples from the Emmaus episode, the women who were at the tomb and maybe others.

The cast of characters is very similar, the setting and the action as well. The geography resembles Luke 19:29-48:<sup>26</sup> Jesus and the disciples move to Bethany and Jerusalem (in Luke 19, the entrance is implicitly described) and to the temple (only Jesus enters it). The movement is finished with the information about the presence of Jesus there: *Καὶ ἦν διδάσκων τὸ καθ' ἡμέραν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ* (19:47). In the ascension scene in Luke, the disciples follow the same path. The theme is also very similar. In both stories, the disciples express their joy<sup>27</sup> and praise God. Both entrances to Jerusalem are scenes of recognising Jesus' messianic kingship and as a risen Lord. The return to Jerusalem can be explicitly mentioned in Luke 24:52 because Jesus transformed the significance of the city, and now it becomes the place where the mission begins. When the disciples return, they demonstrate their obedience to the words of Jesus in 24:47. The reference to the temple and the disciples' prayer seems to be a realization of Jesus' words in 19:46. A temple is no longer a place of sacrifice; it is a place of prayer. What Jesus has announced before regarding the temple's purpose<sup>28</sup> is realized now by the disciples. Luke does not depict Jesus praying in the temple. It is his teaching place, but he prays on the Mount of Olives. There is a general agreement among the scholars that Luke has a more positive comprehension of the temple than other evangelists.<sup>29</sup> It is a sign of a continuation; however, the ambiguous attitude towards it will be apparent also in Acts.<sup>30</sup>

The perspective sketched above makes it easier to understand why the narrator avoided using the Mount of Olives or Bethpage as a place of ascension. The last one is a settlement traditionally not connected with Jesus.<sup>31</sup> From the narrative point of view, it is a *hapax legomenon* in Luke-Acts having no important association for the implied reader. The Mount of Olives, on the contrary, is "overloaded" with meaning. First, due to the prophecy in Zech 14:1-5, it has an eschatological flavour, the topic the narrator develops from the beginning of the second volume (Acts 1:11-12). Luke 24:50-53 has no references to eschatology. In Luke's narration, the Mount of Olives is also where Jesus slept over during his Jerusalem ministry and a place of prayer and the last station before the arrest of Jesus. It is connected with Jesus (as a place of his sojourn and revelation as the eschatological king),<sup>32</sup> but Luke 24:50-53 focuses more on the disciples. Bethany is linked to both

26 Cf. H. Ganser-Kerperin, *Das Zeugnis des Tempels. Studien zur Bedeutung des Tempelmotivs im lukkanischen Doppelwerk* (Münster: Aschendorff 2000) 147.

27 For details, see P.J. Bernadicon, "The Lucan Theology of Joy," *ScEs* 25 (1973) 75-88.

28 Luke uses four terms to describe the temple. The one used here is *ἱερόν* which is "more theologically" neutral and refers to the whole complex of the temple; cf. N.H. Taylor, "The Jerusalem Temple in Luke-Acts," *HTS* 60 (2004) 482.

29 Cf. J.M. Dawsey, "The Origin of Luke's Positive Perception of the Temple," *PRSt* 18/1 (1981) 5-22.

30 Cf. J.H. Elliott, "Temple versus Household in Luke-Acts. A Contrast in Social Institutions," *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (ed. J.H. Neyrey) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 1991) 211-241. From the very beginning of the Lukan account, the temple was a temporal institution: A. Casalegno, *Gesù e il tempio. Studio redazionale su Luca-Atti* (Brescia: Morcelliana 1984) 222.

31 Cf. J. Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1969) 90-91.

32 Cf. Ganser-Kerperin, *Zeugnis*, 152.



Jesus and the disciples, so the choice of Bethany and no reference to the Mount of Olives is a subtle hint that the narrative focuses more on the attitude of Jesus' followers.

The place references in the ascension scenes do not stay in contradiction with each other. The Mount of Olives in Acts 1:12 gives us information about the place from which disciples came. However, it would be striking that the location of the action is disclosed after its conclusion. If it is the case here, it would be a unique example in the Lukan work. It is not written that the ascension took place on the mountain. The Mount of Olives as a place where the ascension happened is at least not stressed by the narrator, who plays the role of mediator between the narrative world and the audience. It is possible that the disciples moved on from the place of ascension (it could be, of course, Bethany) to the Mount of Olives and then to Jerusalem. This scenario is not ruled out by the narrator, who is apparently not interested in giving clear information about where the ascension took place. Furthermore, the Mount of Olives has an eschatological meaning in Jewish belief and is connected with Jerusalem in the narrative (mentioned twice in v. 12). The place of the two "ascensions" can be the same; however, the difference is that in Luke, the narrator mentions the name Bethany explicitly (linking it to 19:28) before the event. Still, the Mount of Olives (which has eschatological connotations) is named after the scene.

#### d) Action

The itinerary of the characters is almost the same: Jesus goes from the place close to Bethany and to the Mount of Olives to heaven in both stories, and the disciples move to Jerusalem. We disagree with Mikael C. Parsons that the purpose of returning to the city differs in the accounts significantly.<sup>33</sup> Praying and praising are semantically similar. Moreover, after the ascension, the disciples form a community ready to carry on the Jesus given mission in both stories. However, the community description in Acts is far more detailed and forms a separate scene. The differences of significance to the action are the blessing and prostration (Luke) and the appearance and discourse of two men (Acts).

#### e) Characters

The characters are the same in both stories (Jesus and disciples),<sup>34</sup> with the exception of the two men in white clothes. Surprisingly, characters are described only by the use of personal pronouns in both stories except for Acts 1:10-11, where the narrator calls the newcomers "two men," and in their discourse, the disciples are named "Men of Galilee" and the only name mentioned is Jesus. He is a protagonist in both stories; however, the disciples are more than observers or a foil. In fact, they are at the centre of the narrator's focus. They remain on the stage, and even the biography of Jesus in Luke ends in this way. In both stories, the narrator recounts the inner life of the disciples using only *showing* – "the great joy"

<sup>33</sup> Parsons, *Departure*, 194.

<sup>34</sup> Although some try to enumerate the list of *dramatis personae*, we agree with Frei's principle that the narrator mentions only the disciples as a whole.

(Luke 24:52) and “they were looking intently up into the sky as he was going” (Acts 1:10). The presence of two men creates a link commonly acknowledged in the scholarship between the first and last Jesus’ post-Eastern appearance:<sup>35</sup>

Luke 24:4-9	Acts 1:10-12
καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ ἀπορεῖσθαι αὐτάς... καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο ἐπέστησαν αὐταῖς ἐν ἐσθήτι ἀστραπτούσῃ... εἶπαν πρὸς αὐτάς τί ζητεῖτε... οὐκ ἔστιν ὧδε, ἀλλὰ ἡγέρθη... Καὶ ὑποστρέψασαι ἀπὸ τοῦ μνημείου...	καὶ ὡς ἀτενίζοντες ἦσαν... καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο παρειστήκεισαν αὐτοῖς ἐν ἐσθήσεσι λευκαῖς οἱ καὶ εἶπαν... τί ἐστήκατε... οὗτος ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀναλημφθεὶς... Τότε ὑπέστρεψαν... ἀπὸ ὄρους.

It is, however, surprising that Gerhard Lohfink (like Arie W. Zwiep) does not notice the occurrence of ‘Galilee’ in both discourses. Another connection is in the number of men. Usually, one angel appears in Luke-Acts (Luke 1:11, 26; 2:9; Acts 5:19; 8:26; 10:3, 30; 11:3; 12:7, 23).

The ascension description in v. 9 fits the resurrection-exaltation scheme and has its continuance in Acts 2:33; 5:31, as observed by the scholars.<sup>36</sup> However, we do not insist on this dimension of the text. Resurrection is already “enough”; all theories which try to stabilize the necessity of the ascension diminish the meaning of the resurrection.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, these concepts create also unsolvable problems like where was Jesus after his resurrection before entering heaven? Lohfink and Zwiep<sup>38</sup> made bizarre suggestions trying to answer this question: “Offensichtlich befand sich Jesus – dem Verständnis des Lukas zufolge – während der vierzig Tage nach Ostern noch nicht im Himmel, sondern in einer Art Zwischenzustand, in dem er zwar verklärt, aber noch nicht erhöht war”; “The underlying thought seems to be that the appearances are temporary manifestations of the risen Jesus to his followers, after which he withdrew himself again to some hidden place on earth.”

f) Focalization

The ascension in Luke possesses the external focalization; in Acts, there is an internal one. In Luke, the disciples know more than the reader, so that begs the question: why do

35 Cfr. Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt*, 196.  
36 D. Marguerat, *Risurrezione. Un percorso di vita* (Torino: Claudiana 2003) 9–24. The author distinguishes three types of language describing the resurrection in ancient church: *il linguaggio del risveglio, dell'esaltazione, della vita*.  
37 Joseph A. Fitzmyer (“The Ascension of Christ and Pentecost,” *TS* 45 [1984] 413, 422) points out that in Luke 24, Jesus is already exalted (v. 26). Moreover, other NT passages about Christ’s glory do not mention ascension: Rom 6:4; 1 Thess 1:10; Rev 1:12-18; 3:21b; 6:1b-7; 7:17.  
38 Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt*, 274; Zwiep, *Ascension*, 133.



not we have access to the deep inner life of the disciples? Acts 1:10 is, on the other hand, the first moment when the internal focalization begins. Luke 24:50-53 does not contain any words of characters, and Acts 1:11 contains a direct speech. What kind of experience is the narrator trying to transmit in the second ascension scene?

#### g) Literary Genre

Considering the differences, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the affinities between the two passages are fundamental. The main point they share in common is the literary genre of rapture, despite some modifications. We have to pay tribute to Lohfink's powerful dissertation by considering the genre of Luke 24:50-53 and answering why the author applied it to the book's final scene.<sup>39</sup> Two genres in ancient literature were used to describe a famous person's death: *rapture* and *journey of the soul*. The latter is defined by the following elements: a) the *psyche* separated from the body; b) the focus is on the journey's progression; c) the human witnesses are absent because the story is told from the perspective of a raptured person. Rapture, on the other hand, has different features: a) it is not focused on the journey but *a quo* and *ad quem*, so it marks a dividing line between two periods; b) it is narrated from an "earthly" perspective which does not necessarily mean that there are some witnesses, but they are often present; c) there is no body/soul division; d) it is God who takes the person to heaven; he is quite often explicitly mentioned, or the author uses divine passive form – this creates another difference: in *Himmelsreise* a soul follows his divine nature, but rapture is an exceptional event.

Zwiep's contribution to the rapture genre is not to be overlooked. Firstly, Zwiep's point is that the choice of rapture stresses God's initiative in all that had happened to Jesus.<sup>40</sup> The second inference comes from the fact that the German scholar is more mindful of the Jewish tradition. In this perspective, the rapture in Luke 24, having an analogy to the Elijah cycle, underlines the task of Jesus in the future – Parousia. In this way, the ascension in Luke prepares for an eschatological second coming of the Messiah, which is developed explicitly in Acts 1:11. The perspective of the "task" of Jesus is more plausible to apply to the narrative than the resurrection-exaltation scheme, which was a subject of great attention in scholarship for many years. The mentioning of heaven as the place of Jesus' sojourn is worth considering.<sup>41</sup> It is not only a place of exaltation but also a counterpart to earth. It fits the Elijah typology: Jesus has a "new" task, a new role. He assured the disciples after the resurrection about his presence, but it was a different type of presence than before. Jesus in heaven is separated from the disciples who begin their task on earth.

<sup>39</sup> The classification of the genre is Lohfink's great contribution to the study about ascension (*Himmelfahrt*, 32–70). Nevertheless, Zwiep (*Ascension*, 38) demonstrates that Lohfink has underestimated the possible influence of Jewish rapture tradition, especially from the "intertestamental" literature. See the review of OT rapture stories: A. Schmitt, *Entrückung, Aufnahme, Himmelfahrt. Untersuchungen zu einem Verstellungsbereich im Alten Testament* (FB 10; Stuttgart: KBW 1973); Mihoc, *Ascension*, 18–45.

<sup>40</sup> Zwiep, *Ascension*, 181.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Sleeman, *Geography*, 88.

*Religionsgeschichtliche* analysis helps answer the question: why did Luke choose the rapture genre to put in the middle of his narrative? We noted in the introduction that resurrection and rapture are somewhat more competitive than complementary because the resurrected person does not need ascension, and an ascended person does not need resurrection. Nevertheless, the rapture fits the narrative goal of Luke-Acts very well. As we have seen, the narration focuses on the disciples, which matches the requirements of the rapture genre. The whole of chapter 24 describes the change of the disciples from the frustration after the death on the cross to the recognition of Jesus as Messiah. The rapture genre helps shift the Lukan camera's eye to the disciples, who have a demanding role to play in the second volume. This is why the other evangelists end their Gospels in a different way. By using the "concept" of ascension, Luke has closed (maybe historicized) the time of the disciples' preparation for the mission and, at the same time, the process of full recognition of what the death and resurrection meant for them.<sup>42</sup> It was necessary because the event of the resurrection itself has no witnesses. Ascension in Luke fits the Elijah-Elisha typology and prepares the disciples (and the reader) for the outpouring of the Spirit. The rapture of Jesus, like that of Elijah, is a sign of continuity between Jesus and his followers. Jean Louis Ska helps us to understand the profound meaning of the departure of Elijah:

In altre parole, Eliseo diventa profeta quando Elia non sarà più di questo mondo. In qualche modo, si può dire che Elia deve sparire per permettere a Eliseo di crescere, di maturare e di acquistare la vera statura del profeta [...] Rimarrà una solo cosa da fare per raggiungere Elia: diventare Elia, fare le sue veci, continuare il suo mandato e le sue lotte.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, in 2 Kgs 2:10, Elijah explicitly presents the condition: You have asked a difficult thing, yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours – otherwise not (NIB). Luke's narrative strategy is a brilliant example of how the choice of literary genre serves to convey the message. The genre of rapture was picked up because of the disciples.<sup>44</sup> This is why the other evangelists do not include ascension<sup>45</sup> scenes in their Gospels to the extent as Luke did: they are not concerned with writing the story of the disciples. The resurrection was an event without any witness, but the ascension gave an opportunity to present Jesus' followers as authoritative continuators of his mission.<sup>46</sup> The departure of Jesus is a *terminus*

42 Cf. Aletti, *Gesù*, 189–210, where the author analysis the Christology of Luke 24. Jesus invites his disciples to understand the Scriptures and itinerary they have made together. However, the narrator does not give any details of this process and teaching, so the reader has to wait for them and the book of Acts. From now on, the disciples' teaching has the same authority as Jesus' one.

43 J.L. Ska, "Morire e risorgere: il carro di fuoco (2Re 2,11)," J.L. Ska, *Una goccia d'inchiostro. Finestre sul panorama biblico* (Bologna: EDB 2008) 221.

44 Lohfink (*Himmelfahrt*, 57–58) states that in 2 Kgs 2:1–18, it is Elisha who stays in the centre of the story. The crucial argument is the receiving of the cloak and, above all, the story belongs to the Elisha cycle.

45 We pass over in this study the second ending of Mark, which is an interpolation from the second century CE.

46 Bruce M. Metzger ("The Meaning of Christ's Ascension," *Search the Scriptures. New Testament Studies in Honor of Raymond T. Stamm* [eds. J.M. Myers – O. Reimherr – H.N. Bream] [Leiden: Brill 1969] 128) states that ascension follows the logic of bodily resurrection. It is rather a mere theological deliberation since we do not have in the text any allusion to bodily dimension of Jesus' departure. Even the fact that Jesus eats a fish

*a quo*, so from now on, the disciples can begin acting like Jesus. The ascension is a clear sign: from now on, the only possible access to the Son of God is given by the mediation of the disciples; through them, Jesus himself is acting. Jesus has not left any traces of his person: no tomb, no body. He resides in heaven, so the only way to find him on earth is to meet the disciples. As Jean-Noël Aletti states: “negli Atti, dopo l’ascensione, la cristologia è interamente affidata agli apostoli [...] negli atti, Dio non impone mai ai discepoli il contenuto della loro testimonianza.”<sup>47</sup> The ascension is put in the middle of the Lukan work because it creates an equality sign between Jesus and his followers.

#### h) Uniqueness of the Scene

The unique character of Luke 24:50-53 is the transformation. Firstly, Jesus is taken to heaven and begins his “new” task because the revelation of his divinity and the post-resurrection formation of the disciples has come to an end; the disciples are changed from the disorganized and scared group into the community that praises God and waits for a mission because they finally recognize the living Jesus. The relationship between him and his followers comes into a new stage: they are separated. Jerusalem is no longer the place of Jesus’ rejection and non-recognition but the place of the mission that will soon begin. The temple finally becomes a place of worship according to Jesus’ words. The attitude of the disciples, their joy and praise, have a different reason than in 19:37 and come from the experience that the risen Lord is with them. It also answers why the ascension happened outside Jerusalem and why they left the city. From a narrative point of view, it helps to create a new entrance, a new beginning. Luke uses the topic of return many times. In chapter 24, previous encounters with Jesus were concluded similarly (v. 9; v. 33). Elisha has returned after Elijah’s departure as well in 2 Kgs 2:12-14. Everything is changed and set for new action in the second volume.

Where is the uniqueness of Acts 1:9-11 to be found? It is definitely the topic of Parousia. The ascension is briefly recounted to underline the message of Jesus’ second coming, which is equally important for both the characters and the reader. From this perspective, verse 12 is correlated with the ascension and Parousia. After the discourse of the two men, the vicinity of the Mount of Olives became a place not only of Jesus’ departure but also his return. The reader, along with the characters, is in the same situation: after Jesus’ ascension and before his coming; the disciples have returned from the Mount of Olives (which was a place of farewell) to carry on the mission and to expect the revelation of the Mount of Olives as a venue of Parousia in the indefinite future. According to Luke 21:27, the cloud, the aspect of seeing and the use of the verb *ἔρχομαι* have an eschatological dimension so that both the topic of the scene and the vocabulary create the sense of Jesus’ second coming. The direct reference to the Elijah typology in v. 11 (*ἀναλαμβάνω*) strengthens the eschatological

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(24:42) is not proof of Jesus’ new, “transformed” body but simply evidence that he is really alive. Girl, resurrected by Jesus, does the same in 8:55.

<sup>47</sup> Aletti, *Gesù*, 220.

expectations. In the end: “The ascension is a Parousia in reverse (he leaves now on a cloud that must bring him back). It constitutes a warning: the church must avoid all false hope and positively use the delay accorded for mission.”<sup>48</sup>

## 2. Complementarity of Ascension Accounts

We will proceed in the following way: first, the fundamental meaning and unity of the ascension accounts are to stabilize; that is more important than the differences. To describe the general purpose of the narrative, it is better to use universal analysis tools for literary genre or to analyse them from their positions in the entire narrative. More concrete and detailed analysis tools, as enumerated above, will help answer the meaning of the differences between the two accounts.<sup>49</sup> In this perspective, the context of the scenes plays a crucial role because the differences between the two could be easily noticed in close reading. Still, to comprehend their meaning correctly, it is necessary to consider the context of the chapters firstly and then, more importantly, the references to other parts of the narrative (like in the case of the first ascension account – the correlation to Luke 19:29-48 and the connection to Luke 24:1-12 in the second account).

### 2.1. The Unity of Ascension Accounts

Parsons enumerates eight functions of redundancy in Luke-Acts:<sup>50</sup> 1) it combats the tendency to forget information over an extended narrative; 2) it is a means of emphasis; 3) it has a persuasive effect; 4) it allows for character development; 5) it confirms expectations reached through the reading process; 6) it allows changes in the pattern to be noted; 7) it provides a sense of unity in the narrative; 8) it encourages interaction among the characters and events in the reading process. Points 6) and 7) are applicable to the repetition of ascension.

As the very first scheme helpful in harmonizing the two ascension accounts, we will consider the following opposition: continuity and discontinuity. We take this inspiration from Bovon’s reflection; however, we do not share his argument that the ascension in Luke expresses continuity with the preceding narrative and a discontinuity in Acts. He does not give compelling arguments for this sharp contrast.<sup>51</sup> According to our previous narrative analysis, we pointed out that the choice of rapture genre and particularly the reference to

48 F. Bovon, *Luke the Theologian. Fifty-five Years of Research (1955–2005)* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2005) 200.

49 This analysis method has some points in common with Parsons’ strategy, which also recognizes the value of variation in the concept of circularity. However, Parsons’ study is very theoretical, and it seems that the theory about the text prevails upon the text itself. The sign of it is that the deliberation about theoretical issues occupies a large part of his paper.

50 Parsons, *Departure*, 198. Cf. R.C. Tannehill, “The Composition of Acts 3–5. Narrative Development and Echo Effect,” *SBL 1984 Seminar Papers* (ed. K.H. Richards) (Chico, CA: Scholars Press 1984) 217–240.

51 Bovon, “Ascension Stories,” 583.

Elijah-Elisha typology make the ascension equalize the accomplished ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the disciples to come. This is what Parsons articulated: “by repeating the ascension in Acts, the narrator has identified the story of Jesus with the story of the Church,” with the exception that this effect is not achieved only through the repetition of the events but also by choice of literary genre and the typology.<sup>52</sup> This equals sign between the mission of Jesus in Luke and disciples in Acts, creates a continuity on the one hand but the other marks a discontinuity because the nature of the mission in Acts will be different:

Elements of:	continuity	discontinuity
Luke 24:50-53	1) The motif of the journey in v. 50a, which resembles the travel to Jerusalem and gives the sense that this journey is also another stage of Jesus' plan, 2) the blessing – the sign of the continued presence of Jesus with disciples given before the beginning of their mission, 3) the prostration as a sign of the recognition that Jesus is alive.	1) The ascension itself, especially because of its description: Jesus parted from disciples and was carried to heaven.
Acts 1:9-11	1) The use of <i>πορεύομαι</i> in vv. 10-11, which assembles the motif of Jesus' journey with disciples also taking the time to come, another stage of Jesus' teaching pedagogy, 2) “Men of Galilee,” which refers to the beginning of the Gospel.	1) The ascension itself because of the cloud motif which separates the characters and the mentioning of heaven as a counterpart of the earth, 2) the assertion in the discourse that Jesus will not be back until the Parousia.

It is not to overlook that the Elijah typology creates the strict unity of a continuation and a separation. However, the scheme mentioned above does not explain all the differences and discrepancies between the two accounts. Some exegetes tend to see the ascension in Luke as a “departure” and the one in Acts as a “glorification.”<sup>53</sup> However, when we consider the uniqueness of the accounts, it is very difficult to find arguments supporting this view. Both stories describe the departure. Mihoc states that the second account assures the reader about “Christ's heavenly status.” However, was it necessary after the resurrection to confirm it? The context of the prologue does not favour this option. Another explanation is given by Josef Zmijewski, who perceives the ascension in Luke as a farewell (*Abschied*) and a beginning in Acts because it is more oriented to the future.<sup>54</sup> This position is problematic because Acts 1:9-11 also references the past, and the real beginning of the mission will be

<sup>52</sup> Parsons, *Departure*, 192.

<sup>53</sup> Mihoc, *Ascension*, 78.

<sup>54</sup> J. Zmijewski, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (RNT 5; Regensburg: Pustet 1994) 69.

at Pentecost. The combination expressed in German is closer to our position: *Abschied-Abschluss* (farewell-ending).

We present a different argument to explain the discrepancies between the accounts. The rapture genre was chosen because of the disciples, whose story develops in the second volume. The other evangelists are not interested in the ascension event because they do not describe the fate of Jesus' followers. Ascension is an equals sign between the biography of Jesus and the story of the disciples because of two reasons: they recognized Jesus as a living person among them after his death (the ascension in Luke), and he prepared them to carry on the mission which he himself destined for them because they became authoritative witnesses (to the ascension in Acts). So, the key differences can be summarized as follows: recognition – Luke and witnessing – Acts.

## 2.2. Peculiarity of Luke 24:50-53

Based on the comparison made above, we will try to perceive the differences between the two versions of the events and the particularities of the first ascension account in the light of the recognition of the disciples that Jesus is alive among them.

### a) Chronology

The first striking and long-debated difference<sup>55</sup> in the chronology is explained in light of the scheme of recognition. Many authors have tried to explain this problem. Some pointed out that the number 40 has a symbolic value and gives a sense of preparation. However, the scholars do not ask what effect the time references in chapter 24 could have on the ascension account. There are six references to time in Luke 24 (vv. 17, 13, 21, 29, 33). It is very difficult to argue that there is a moment of ellipsis in chapter 24. The narrative time encompasses one day from daybreak to evening.<sup>56</sup> From the previous narrative, the reader knows that it is a very special day, the first of the week, the day of a completely new beginning already announced in 9:22 and 18:33. As Robert C. Tannehill states: "Luke 24 must be understood as a continuous series of interrelated events, not as separate pericopes that can be adequately understood in isolation."<sup>57</sup> Chapter 24 describes the process of recognizing Jesus. The one day of narration corresponds to "one" recognition. It stresses the unity of the process; meanwhile, the number forty offers a better frame for the preparation time. The recognition process is unified and contains the moment of doubts, the personal encounter of Jesus and the public one that ended with the final collective recognition in v. 52.

55 See a summary in H.J. De Jonge, "The Chronology of the Ascension Stories in Luke and Acts," *NTS* 59/2 (2013) 153–158. The author itself tries to present the theory that Acts 1:3 refers to 40 days of apparition after ascension. In this way, Acts 1:9 is not a rapture story but just the closure of appearances. In my opinion, the author makes too much of the meaning of v. 3. Moreover, it is enough to say against his position that 40 days can have symbolic value.

56 [In Luke 24:50-52] "the reader has the impression that we are still on the day of Easter"; Bovon, "Ascension Stories," 577. Henk J. De Jonge ("Chronology," 152–153) presents the position of minority of scholars who claim that it is not possible that just one day could contain such a multitude of events.

57 R.C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1996) 349.



## b) Prostration

The main point of prostration is the recognition of Jesus' divinity. The gesture of the soundless raising of Jesus' hands finds its correlative element in the speechless recognition of his divinity. Aletti stresses the meaning of this type of recognition in Luke 23.<sup>58</sup> Individuals express in direct speech what they recognized, but communal recognitions (23:27; 23:48) are narrated in *showing*. The communal recognition of the disciples in Luke 23 is lacking. In Luke 24, Jesus proves that he is alive; however, the narrator seems to avoid the description of his communal recognition consciously. In 24:41, there is no full recognition, but the reader could suppose that after eating the fish, all doubts should be resolved. However, the final communal recognition is explicitly recounted only in 24:52a.

## c) Plot and the Uniqueness of the Account

The ascension scene in Luke presents the plot of resolution and revelation and forms the larger plot's ending. Matteo Crimella expressed the tension in the narrative:

The narrator recounts in such a way that there is a progression in the encounter with the risen Jesus. Everything takes place in the polarity between absence and presence. The one whom the women seek is absent; he is present but not identified by the two disciples of Emmaus, and he is only recognized when he has become invisible to their eyes; finally, the Eleven and the others meet him, see him, are invited to offer him something to eat.<sup>59</sup>

The play of Jesus' absence and presence and his appearance and disappearance create the tension around whether the disciples are really able to recognize the new post-resurrection status of Jesus.<sup>60</sup> After the first scene (24:1-12), which is the exposition to the plot of Luke 24, the reader asks: will the disciples meet and recognize the risen Jesus? Will they surpass their unbelief (v. 11)? The complete answer to those questions is given only in Luke 24:50-53. After the ascension, the situation is the same as before Chapter 24: Jesus is gone. However, the main difference caused by the ascension is not seen in the new "heavenly status" of Jesus (because the resurrection itself is already enough) but in the disciples' consciousness. In fact, they remain on the stage in Luke 24:53. The uniqueness of the account, which is the character of change, stresses the meaning of this transformation. They have recognized Jesus, but to access the content of their new awareness, we have to wait for their preaching in Acts.

## d) Place

Some scholars see the contradiction between the placement of the two ascension accounts. As we pointed out, there is no inconsistency at this point. Bethany seems to be a reference to Luke 19:29. Passage 19:28-48 has a lot in common with 24:50-53: in both instances,

<sup>58</sup> J.-N. Aletti, *Gesù: una vita da raccontare. Il genere letterario dei vangeli di Matteo, Marco e Luca* (Roma: GBPress 2017) 104–105.

<sup>59</sup> M. Crimella, "The Transformation of Characters in Lk 24. A Narrative Investigation," *RB* 119 (2012) 3.

<sup>60</sup> This play is very well visible in the Emmaus pericope, see Marguerat – Bourquin, *Per leggere*, 62–63.

Jesus leads the way; the disciples follow the same itinerary – from Bethany to Jerusalem and to the temple. The setting, characters and movement are the same, but the main point of comparison is in the disciples' attitude. They are joyous and recognize Jesus' identity. The general significance of the scene – the recognition of Jesus as the king of Israel – matches the final recognition of Jesus after his death in the ascension scene.

#### e) Blessing

This element ends the biography of Jesus in the Lukan Gospel. Many scholars consider the blessing of Jesus as a priestly service because of a parallel to Sir 50:20-21.<sup>61</sup> However, the liturgical context of the action is only a supposition: the place is far from the sacred place, and there is no liturgy. Moreover, the narrative favours the connection with non-priestly blessings, especially with the father's last blessing. The blessing itself has a long biblical tradition (Gen 1 when God blessed the creatures; Gen 9:1 God blessed Noah and Abraham in Gen 12:1-3). In a few instances, the blessing is connected with a mission or even reveals the destiny of the blessed person (Gen 49). It is the case in Luke 24 when Jesus blesses the disciples after giving his last instructions. The event happened at the end of Jesus' earthly life, not at the end of a liturgy. Johannes Munck has enumerated the features of the parting scene: 1) prior farewell speech; 2) warning of obeying or disobeying the teaching; 3) (less frequent) an account of life; 4) prophecy regarding the future; 5) a meal before departure.<sup>62</sup> The context of chapter 24 fits those features. Moreover, the motif of blessing can belong to the Jewish type of rapture genre. Enoch was asked to bless the people before his departure in 2 *En.* 64:4, and he blessed his children and the elders in 57:2 before he was taken away.<sup>63</sup> We consider the blessing a sign of Jesus' presence and confirmation of his previous words. From this perspective, it is evident that the blessing could not be present in the second ascension account.

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- 61 Andrews G. Mekattukunnel (*The Priestly Blessing of the Risen Christ. An Exegetico-Theological Analysis of Luke 24,50-53* [Europäische Hochschulschriften 23/714; Bern: Lang 2001] 62) claims that another argument is a reference to 2:34 where Simeon blessed the parents of Jesus. The author assumes that Simeon was a priest—contra: F. Bovon, *Luke 1. A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2005) 100. Other arguments are not decisive: like the statement that blessing was a priestly prerogative in OT; (there are non-priestly blessings as well). Even more difficult association to accept is the analogy to Moses, who raised his hands during the fight against Amalek in Exod 17:11. This proposal does not take into consideration the narrative context of the Gospel at all. Cfr. L.T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (SP 3; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1991) 403; D. Hamm, "The Tamid Service in Luke-Acts. The Cultic Background behind Luke's Theology of Worship (Luke 1:5-25; 18:9-14; 24:50-53; Acts 3:1; 10:3, 30)," *CBQ* 65 (2003) 218–220.
- 62 J. Munck, "Discours d'adieu dans le Nouveau Testament et dans la littérature biblique," *Aux sources de la tradition chrétienne. Mélanges offerts à M. Maurice Goguel* (ed. P. Benoit) (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé 1950) 155–170; cf. J.F. Maile, "The Ascension in Luke-Acts," *TynBul* 37 (1986) 43–44.
- 63 G. Friedrich, "Lk 9,51 und die Entrückungschristologie des Lukas," *Orientierung an Jesus. Zur Theologie der Synoptiker* (eds. P. Hoffmann – N. Brox – W. Pesch) (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder 1973) 58–59. The author sees also the correlation to 2 Kgs 2:9. Gerhard Friedrich neglects the possible references to Sir 50 and explains the motifs in the light of rapture terminology.

Tannehill summarizes chapter 24 in the following way: “the resurrection narrative tells how disciples who previously could not understand Jesus’ prophecies of death and resurrection (cf. 9:44-45; 18:31-34) not only encounter the risen Messiah but also finally come to understand when instructed by Jesus, the ironic way that God’s purpose is being achieved through the rejection and death of the Messiah.”<sup>64</sup> The disciples will be witnesses of the resurrection, but the interval between this event and the ascension was necessary to fully recognize the meaning of Jesus’ death.

### 2.3. Peculiarity of Acts 1:9-11

The second ascension account is not just a simple repetition of the first one. The context of the prologue is crucial to understand the account properly. The main characterization of the disciples is that they are prepared to carry on the mission, which purpose is witnessing.

#### a) Chronology

The 40-day span is the most striking difference between the two ascension scenes. Sejin J. Park summarizes the traditional data about the duration of the period of time between the resurrection and ascension:

Tertullian (Apol. 21) follows Acts 1,3 in attesting forty days. However, the Ethiopic *Epistula Apostolorum* 18 (29) identifies the Resurrection day itself as the day of Ascension (cf. Epistle of Barnabas 15,8; Aristides, Apology 2; Gospel of Peter 35–42). Irenaeus says that some Gnostic groups believed that Jesus talked with his followers for 18 months after his resurrection (Adv. haer. I 1.5; 28.7). Similarly, the Ethiopic version of the Ascension of Isaiah 9:16 has Jesus ascending 545 days (approximately 18 months) after his Resurrection, while the Apocryphon of James 2,19-24 has it as 550 days after the Resurrection. Finally, Pistis Sophia 1.1 has Jesus staying for eleven years after his resurrection before he ascends to heaven.<sup>65</sup>

This makes the question even more intriguing: why did Luke choose the forty-day span? There are many convincing answers provided in the history of the survey about the ascension. Firstly, the number forty is connected not with the ascension pericope but it is a period of time of appearances and of teaching about the kingdom of God (1:3).<sup>66</sup> Number 40 is deeply rooted in the biblical tradition as the time (Lohfink calls it “sacred” time) necessary for preparation.<sup>67</sup> Jesus was tempted in the desert for 40 days in Luke 3:22. Zwiep notes: “in rabbinic sources, learning and teaching 40 times suggests reliable instruction.”<sup>68</sup> Baruch, before his departure, taught the people and then, after 40 days, was taken

<sup>64</sup> Tannehill, *Luke*, 349.

<sup>65</sup> S.J. Park, *Pentecost and Sinai. The Festival of Weeks as a Celebration of the Sinai Event* (LHBOTS 342; London: Clark 2008) 206.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Parsons, *Departure*, 194; Zwiep, *Ascension*, 97.

<sup>67</sup> Lohfink (*Himmelfahrt*, 176–186) makes careful analysis of the occurrences of symbolic numbers in the Bible; see also: Mihoc, *Ascension*, 80.

<sup>68</sup> Zwiep (*Ascension*, 99) notes also that there is no parallel to 40 day-span in the Hellenistic rapture stories.

away.<sup>69</sup> James D.G. Dunn gives another explanation: “the explanation that the tradition of the first Pentecost was already sufficiently established– that is, of the first great experience of the Spirit in collective Christian memory, as having happened on the next pilgrim feast (Pentecost). Forty days would be the next round number before fifty.”<sup>70</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer notes that the number fifty associated with Pentecost is more important than the 40-day span.<sup>71</sup> Another reason or maybe consequence for defining the exact period of time is that the experience of Paul in Damascus differs from the experiences of the apostles.<sup>72</sup> All of these answers are valid and fruitful. From our perspective, it is to stress the connection with the core of Acts 1:9-11. This bond is expressed by Zwiep: “The function of the forty days of instruction is clearly related to the role of the apostles as eyewitnesses.”<sup>73</sup> In the second ascension account, the disciples are presented as witnesses. The number forty reinforces their reliability. After Luke 24, the reader could ask: “ok, they have recognized Jesus, but are they really prepared for the mission, for witnessing (24:48)?” Luke 24 recounts just one day which could give rise to doubts about the disciples’ competence. Forty days assures us that they have enough time to be fully instructed and to see Jesus alive after his death. It dispels all doubts that what happened was only an illusion. Those doubts could have emerged while reading chapter 24.

#### b) The Analogy to Luke 24:1-12

From this perspective that the disciples were “in need” of the time of preparation, the analogy to the beginning of post-resurrection time is convincing. We do not share Parsons’ suggestion that this link expresses the unity of the ascension and the resurrection.<sup>74</sup> It forms a framework for the period of apostolic instruction. The process which began with the discovery of the empty tomb, ends with the ascension. In this way, the sudden appearance of the two newcomers is a comprehensible modification of Luke 24,50-53. The accent of the narrative is put not on the process of recognition but on the preparation and teaching for the witnessing. This aspect plays an important role in Acts.<sup>75</sup>

69 Friedrich, “Lk 9,51,” 64.

70 J.D.G. Dunn, “The Ascension of Jesus. A Test Case for Hermeneutics,” *Auferstehung – Resurrection* (eds. F. Avemarie – H. Lichtenberger) (WUNT 135; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001) 303.

71 Fitzmyer, “Ascension,” 437.

72 However, the issue seems to be more complex: G. O’Collins, “Luke on the Closing of the Easter Appearances,” *Luke and Acts* (eds. G. O’Collins – G. Marconi) (New York: Paulist Press 1991) 162–165.

73 Zwiep, *Ascension*, 173. De Jonge, “Chronology,” 160, states: “In Luke’s view, this instruction makes the apostles reliable teachers of the Church, authorized guardians of the truth, and an effective tool against deviant ideas.” James D.G. Dunn (“Ascension,” 305) argues that Luke restricts “apostle-making appearances” to forty days in order to limit the number of reliable apostles.

74 Parsons, *Departure*, 193.

75 For details see, for instance, A. Landi, *La testimonianza necessaria. Paolo testimone della salvezza universale a Roma in At 28,16-31* (AnBib 210; Roma: GBPress 2015) chap. I.

### c) Uniqueness of the Account – Ending and Beginning

It refers to the beginning of Jesus' ministry (and of the disciples' learning) in the discourse of the two men (Galilee). The whole pericope assembles at the beginning of post-resurrection time (Luke 14:1-12). On the other hand, mentioning Parousia marks the end of another period. It is now the time that Jesus will work through the disciples and the Holy Spirit. The "seeing" aspect renders the disciples reliable witnesses and forms a summary of their preparation time. According to Luke 21:27, this aspect is correlated with eschatological expectations. Witnessing is an important feature of being an apostle (Acts 1:22). In this passage, the apostles are witnesses of the resurrection. Still, it is necessary to be present during Jesus' ascension to give this testimony. Hence, the time between the resurrection and the ascension is indispensable for the apostles and the growing church.

### d) Place

The Mount of Olives matches the eschatological context of the pericope. The narrator lets the newcomers announce the Parousia and confirms this aspect of the narrative after it by mentioning a place of "eschatological" significance. The return from the Mount of Olives creates this sense that it is a new stage of salvation; the disciples have to come back from the ascension place and do not expect Jesus to return suddenly. They have to carry on his mission and expect the Holy Spirit. From previous dialogue with Jesus vv. 4-8, the disciples know that Pentecost does not mean the end of a time but the beginning of a new phase. The geography is quite astonishing: in Luke 24:1-12, which creates a clear link to Acts 1:9-11, we are close to the tomb, so the place under the earth; in the ascension scene, Jesus goes to heaven and then the disciples went down from the mountain, the place closer to heaven, to carry on the mission on earth.<sup>76</sup>

### e) *Showing* and Internal Focalization

Verse 10 is written in *showing*. In this way, the disciples and the reader are waiting for the next great event to come: Pentecost. This internal focalization strengthens the effect described in the previous point: the disciples are fully prepared to be witnesses. Starting in v. 10 through the summary in vv. 12-14 and the election of Mattia in vv. 15-26, the narrator conveys a great sense of expectation.

## Conclusions

This study presents a synchronic approach to the text and therefore does not delve into the details of interpolation theories which attempt to explain the discrepancies between

<sup>76</sup> Crimella, "Transformation," 5: "So if the development of overlapped scenes leads Jesus, the hero of the macro-unit who goes from the tomb (under the earth), the place of death, to heaven (above the earth), the place of glory, passing by way of the earth (the place of the living), the path of the human characters must follow the same stages." However, the author refers to this reflection only in chapter 24 of Luke.

the two ascension accounts. Rather, we think that Luke is a gifted writer and a good storyteller who is able to modulate received patterns in order to convey his own message by writing down the story of Jesus and his followers. In doing so, we did not want to minimize the differences between the two accounts. On the contrary, we fully appreciated them in order to comprehend the author's narrative strategy of providing alternative accounts of one event which is repeated twice in a very particular place— in the middle of his great project.

The explanation of the ascension presented in this study provides a clear answer to the question: why is Luke the only evangelist who recounts the story of Jesus' departure? The reason can be found in the second volume of his work: because of the disciples. Other evangelists do not narrate this event because they are not interested in writing the story about the disciples. The resurrection itself is enough and constitutes a "sufficient" content of the kerygma. However, the disciples "need" the time between the resurrection and the ascension because they have to recognize Jesus' new status and be prepared to carry on the mission. Acts 1:22 provides a good argument for this thesis: the choice of the new apostles will depend on whether they witnessed the resurrection and whether they accompanied Christ since the baptism until the day of ascension. Luke's choice to put the story into the rapture genre matches this observation. One of the features of this genre is the presence of witnesses who guarantee that the person is really gone because there is no sign, no tomb, no body to offer proof that they are no longer on earth. There is no witness to the resurrection event itself. Moreover, Elijah-Elisha typology (which is another exquisite model applied by Luke) enriches the rapture genre by highlighting that the ministry of disciples will be at the same level of importance as the ministry of Jesus. There is a continuity. As we have considered before, the ascension of Christ presents the radical discontinuity between Jesus and the disciples, but it is also a sign of continuity. The references to the journey previously made to Jerusalem are signs that after the ascension, a new stage of Jesus' guidance of the disciples will begin. The ascension of Jesus (and the gift of his Spirit) is "necessary" for the disciples. They have everything they need to carry on and they do not need the presence of Jesus in the same way as before. Jesus "has to" disappear to make the disciples his real successors.

The discrepancies between the two accounts are explained thanks to Luke's narrative strategy. The first account ends the biography of Luke in chapter 24. The plot of this part of the Gospel recounts not only the appearances of Jesus, but the process of recognition that 1) Jesus is alive and 2) he must die on the cross. The long-debated question about chronology can be explained in the following way: one day of narrated time in Luke 24 strengthens the impression that it is one process of recognition presented as a whole. The blessing, an element that has no equivalent in Acts 1:9-11, is a sign of Jesus' presence. Disciples are legitimate followers of Jesus. The allusion to Luke 19:29-48, where Jesus was recognized by the disciples, reinforces this effect. The second account is characterized by the presentation of the disciples as prepared and authoritative successors. Forty days offer the time needed for the preparation for this mission. This account is more likely to be considered as the "closure" of the appearances since references to their beginning are found in Luke 24:1-12.



The discourse of the two newcomers marks an end to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and provides a new limit: Parousia. Disciples are presented as the witnesses– this theme will be developed later in Acts.

Fitzmyer notes that “the ascension of Christ is the guarantee of Christian destiny,”<sup>77</sup> basing his argument on the Scripture (1 Thess 4:16-17; Heb 6:19-20). Bovon recounts an anecdote about one of his students who came to the conclusion that the main thesis of her doctorate should be a reflection on the fact that the ascension happened “for the benefit of Jesus' disciples, for the benefit of the Church, for the benefit of humanity. Jesus ascends to heaven so that the believers themselves can also ascend to God.”<sup>78</sup> These intuitions match the results of our study.

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<sup>77</sup> Fitzmyer, “Ascension,” 425.

<sup>78</sup> Bovon, “Ascension Stories,” 591.

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