

Mary's Assumption into Heaven

Introduction

Pope Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption into heaven. The Catholic Church teaches that "when the course of her earthly life was finished" Mary "was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory."¹ Although the formal definition was not made until 1950, the belief in Mary's Assumption dates back to the apostolic age.

The Lutheran pastor and scholar, Charles Dickson, notes that "the feast [of the Assumption] celebrated by the Church on August 15, dates from the fourth century, when numerous festivals honoring our Lady were common practice." The history of Church feasts demonstrates that these celebrations grew from beliefs that existed long before the feasts themselves were formally inaugurated. "Interestingly enough, the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, included this feast on a list of liturgical celebrations that should, in his words, 'be observed among Evangelical Catholics as a sign of continuity and order'"²

There is no explicit statement in the New Testament that proclaims Mary's Assumption. This is not surprising because it is likely that most of the New Testament was written before Mary was assumed into heaven.³ There is, however, a biblical basis for the belief in the Assumption.

Sacred Scripture

The Bible affords several examples of unusual departures. The first is the righteous Enoch. "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because **God took him**" (Gen 5:24). St. Paul informs us that "by faith Enoch was **taken** so that he **did not experience death**; and 'he was not found, because God had taken him'" (Heb 11:5).

There are also unusual circumstances surrounding the death of Moses. "He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Bethpeor, but **no one knows his burial place to this day**" (Deut 34:6). This mystery is augmented in the Epistle of Jude. "But when the archangel Michael contended with the devil and **disputed about the body of Moses**, he did not dare to bring a condemnation of slander against him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you'" (Jude 9)! Finally, during Jesus' transfiguration: "Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him" (Mt 17:3). The implication is that these two Old Testament saints, who represent the law and the prophets, appeared in bodily form.

Finally, the parting of Elijah was also extraordinary. "As they [Elijah and Elisha] continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah **ascended into a whirlwind into heaven**" (2 Kgs 2:11).

These events regarding Enoch, Moses and Elijah lay a biblical foundation for accepting the reality of the **rapture**. The word "rapture" comes from the Latin word *raptus, rapare* that means, "to carry away." In Christian theology it finds a basis in Paul's epistles. "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be **caught up** together with them in the cloud to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess 4:15-17). "For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be **raised imperishable**, and we shall be **changed**" (1 Cor 15:52).

The relevancy of these biblical passages is that they support an argument of fittingness. It is suitable that Mary, who was never touched by sin, should experience the fruits Jesus' resurrection by being bodily assumed into heaven at the end of her earthly life. While an argument of fittingness is useful in establishing what "may" have happened, it does not establish the fact that it did happen.

However, there is one passage of Scripture that does imply Mary's Assumption. In portraying Mary as the ark of the covenant (Rev 11:19), she is described in bodily terms. "And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her **feet**, and on her **head** a crown of twelve stars" (Rev 12:1). Scholars have interpreted the imagery of this vision in multiple layers referring to Mary, the Church and even Israel.⁴ However, the possibility of multiple meanings does not negate the specific application to Mary. It is she, alone, to whom it can be most accurately affirmed: "she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (Rev 12:5).

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1. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950): DS 3903; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 966.
 2. Charles Dickson, *A Protestant Pastor Looks at Mary* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., c. 1996), pp. 83-84.
 3. The majority of modern scripture scholars propose late dates for the composition of New Testament books. However, the basis of these claims is often rooted in a bias that rejects biblical historicity and inspiration. There is, nevertheless, a growing body of modern scholarship, Protestant and Catholic, that argues for early authorship. For more information on this subject consult the essay "Dating the Books of the New Testament."
 4. David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, c. 1987). pp. 296-303.
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