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Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online

Rapture

(2,643 words)

In this article “rapture” (Ger. *Entrückung*) is taken as a technical term for a bodily translation into the “beyond” (heaven or an otherwise inaccessible place) as the conclusion of one’s earthly life, without the intervention of death (Lohfink, 1971, 32–74; Wißmann, 1982, 680; Zwiép, 1997, 36–40; 2010, 44–49). This rather strict definition helps to disentangle the wide variety of (both literal and metaphorical) language of ascent in the ancient world and appreciate the distinctive place of the rapture category in ancient thought. Rapture stories are widely attested in Sumerian, Akkadian, and Babylonian sources, in the Greco-Roman world, in Jewish and Christian sources, in Islamic tradition, and elsewhere (see Bibliography). Rapture in the sense of rapture in ecstasy (e.g. 2 Cor 12:2–4; see Himmelfarb, 1993), rapture as a temporary visit to heaven to receive knowledge (e.g. Rev 4:1–2; *T. Ab.* 10:1–15:3 [Recension A of *Testament of Abraham*]), intra-terrestrial translocations (e.g. Ezek 3:12; 8:3; 11:1, 24; Acts 8:39–40; Bel 36), and rapture understood as an ascent of the soul after death (e.g. *T. Ab.* 13–14 [Recension B of *Testament of Abraham*]) are different constellations (or different discourses) and are not treated in this article.

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Ancient Near East

Rapture stories in this strict sense of the term appear to be a well-established motif in the literary traditions of the ancient Near East from very early times (Schmitt, 1976, 4–45; Wißmann, 1982; Colpe, 1991; Colpe & Habermehl, 1995). In a Sumerian creation and deluge text, probably composed in the 17th century BCE, the pious king Ziusudra is taken up by the gods Anu and Enlil after the great flood because he had pleased them with his past conduct. Immortal life is bestowed upon him (“life like that of a god [...] breath eternal like that of a

god”), after which the gods translate him (*mu-un-til-eš* “they [i.e. Anu and Enlil] caused to dwell” or “they settle”; from the root *til*) to the land of Dilmun, “the place where the sun rises,” so that he does not experience death (ed. Civil, 1969, 144–145; *ANET* 44, 254–261).

Likewise, in the Akkadian *Gilgamesh Epic*, which provides a Babylonian-Assyrian version of the Sumerian flood and rapture myth from the 12th century BCE, the god Enlil blesses the priest Utnapishtim and his wife (note the expansion!) after the great flood, bestows divine life on them, and then takes (*leqû[m]*) the couple to make them reside at their future residence far away “at the mouth of the rivers” (*ina pi-i nrti*) (ed. Campbell Morgan, 1930, 64 trans., plate 50 text; trans. Speiser, *ANET* 189–196).

In the Hellenistic period, the ancient Sumerian myth of King Ziusudra found its way into the now lost writings of the Babylonian priest Berossus (340–270 BCE), fragments of which have been preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Chron.* 1.3.2; 1.7.1). After the great flood, Xisuthros (the Greek equivalent of Ziusudra), his wife, his daughter, and the ship’s captain (note again the expansion!) disembark and disappear. When those who had stayed behind in the ship set out to look for them, a heavenly voice informs them that Xisuthros and his company, because of his piety, now dwell with the gods (i.e. in heaven). They are then commanded to install a religious cult.

Similar stories about escapes from death by divine intervention can be found in Indian and Persian literature and in postbiblical tradition (Scheftelowitz, 1916–1919, 216ff.; Zwiep, 1996, 37–38n5).

Greco-Roman World

Rapture stories in the strict sense of the word were never as popular as in the Greco-Roman world. In both Greek and Roman tradition, the privilege of being taken up to the world of the gods at the end of one’s life (either physically or in spirit) evolved into speculations about the person’s divine status, even to the extent that rapture and deification became more or less synonymous terms (Lohfink, 1971). Among the more popular rapture stories are those about Ganymede, the cupbearer of Zeus (Hom. *Il.* 20.232–235; *Hom. Hym.* 5.202–206; Ovid, *Met.* 10.159–161; 11.756), Menelaos (Hom. *Od.* 4.561–565; Eurip. *Hel.* 1676–1677), the heroes of the fourth generation (Hes. *Op.* 166–173), Apollonius of Tyana (Philostr. *Vita ap.* 8.29–30), Drusilla, Caligula’s sister and mistress (Dio. *Hist. rom.* 59.11.4), and especially Hercules (Apollod. *Bib.* 2.7.7; 2.8.1; Diod. Sic. *Bib.* 4.38.4–5; Ps.-Lucian *Cyn.* 13; Lysias 2.11; Eurip. *Heracl.* 910; Luc. *Hermot.* 7; Cic. *Tusc.* 1.14.32) and Romulus, the founder of Rome (Livy 1.16.1; Plut. *Rom.* 27.3.34–28.8.36; *Num.* 2.1–3; *Cam.* 32.5; 33.7; Dion. Hali. *Ant. rom.* 2.56.2–3; 2.63.3–4 (!); Aur. Vict. *Vir. ill.* 2.13–14). From critical authors such as Cicero, Petronius, and others, it can be deduced that the rapture category evolved into a literary category that even critics made use of (Cic. *Nat. d.* 2.14.62; Petr. *Sat.* 17; Sen. *Apol.* 9). Standard motifs include the cloud, eyewitnesses, the notion of immortality and deification, and sometimes post-rapture appearances.

Strictly speaking, the idea of apotheosis (divinization) of the Roman emperor – in the heydays of the imperial cult an almost stock reward for an emperor to conclude his earthly career – cannot be classified as a rapture in the strict sense, since the deceased (!) emperor is not said to have escaped death. However, the apotheosis tradition shares many features with the rapture tradition, most prominently the notions of deification and immortality. Especially in the Greco-Roman milieu, ascent to the gods implies one's deification, in other words, a person who ascends to the gods (a hero, an emperor, a famous philosopher) becomes a divine being himself. To say that "Romulus has gone to heaven" is materially identical with the statement that "Romulus has become a god," and vice versa: "Romulus has become a god" implies his previous ascent to the world of the gods (Roloff, 1970, 84). On the roots and (later) acceptance of the notion of deification in early Christianity, see Russell (2004).

Old Testament and Early Judaism

The notion of deification, inherent to rapture thinking outside the Jewish context, must have posed a large obstacle for Jews to embrace rapture claims, as it formed a threat to Israel's most basic monotheistic beliefs. However, the Old Testament and early Jewish sources do attest rapture speculations, admittedly on a far lesser scale than in its surroundings but still clearly recognizable (Lohfink, 1971; Schmitt, 1976; Betz, 1982; Zwiép, 1996; 2010). Both Enoch (Gen 5:21–24; Sir 44:16; 49:14; Wis 4:10–14; Heb 11:5) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11; Sir 48:9, 12) are said to be bodily taken up or taken away at the end of their earthly life to dwell in God's presence rather than in Sheol. In due course the conviction that Enoch and Elijah were still alive somewhere evolved into speculations about their (eschatological) return to earth. The first contours of what may be called the rapture-preservation paradigm are already found in Mal 3:23–24, but the model was developed especially in the centuries before and after the turn of the era and was in due course integrated into a Jewish/monotheistic worldview (Enoch: e.g. *1 En.* 12:1–2; 81:6; 87:3–4; *Jub.* 4:16–26; 1QapGen^{af} 2–5; 2–3 *Enoch*; Elijah: Sir 48:9–12; *Jos. Ant.* 9.2.2 [28], and possibly *1 En.* 89:53; 90:31; 93:8; *4 Ezra* 6:26; also in the NT: Mark 9:11–13; 9:2–10). In addition to Enoch and Elijah, such pious "biblical" figures as Moses (*Sifre Deut.* 357; *Gen. Rab.* 5:24; *Yal. Num.* 27:12; *Aug. Tract. Ev. Jo.* 74:2), Ezra (*4 Ezra* 14:7–9; 14:48 Syr.), Baruch (*2 Bar.* 76:1–5), Phinehas (*L.A.B.* 48.1–2), and Melchizedek (*2 En.* 71–72) were believed to have escaped death and to have been translated to heaven, waiting for a future reentry at the end of times to fulfill their God-given task (Haufe, 1961). Rapture thinking flourished especially (but not exclusively) in apocalyptic circles and evolved into a more or less standard narration scheme, including the notion of a prevenient period of instructions (not infrequently a period of 40 days preceding the actual rapture, a notion completely absent from Greco-Roman parallels), a mountain as a stepping stone into the heavenlies, a cloud as a means of transport, and the (typically Jewish) expectation of a future reentry at the end of days (Zwiép, 1996; 2010).

Earliest Christian Texts

Paul, on two occasions, applies the notion of rapture to the fate of believers at the end of time: see in 1 Thess 4:17 and in 1 Cor 15:51–52 (2 Cor 12:2–4, although using typical rapture language, describes a rapture in ecstasy and belongs therefore to a different category). He does not apply rapture language to Jesus. Outside the Lukan writings, rapture language in the strict sense is applied to Jesus only in Mark 2–20; Matt 9:15; Luke 5:35 (the removal of the bridegroom) and Rev 12:5 (the removal of the Messianic child, see also 2 *En.* 72). Rev 11:3–12 applies the rapture category to the Two Witnesses. The most elaborate employment of the rapture category is found in Luke–Acts, where typical rapture motives have been integrated into Luke’s larger narrative plot. Especially early Jewish rapture traditions seem to have put an imprint on Luke to provide his readers with an apology for the delay of the Parousia: In the same way as the Jewish saints were taken up to heaven to make their reentry into the eschaton, so Jesus had been taken up to heaven and would surely come back (Zwiep, 1997; 2001; 2016). Luke, to be sure, does not promote an independent, stand-alone “rapture Christology,” for his indebtedness to the typical Jewish rapture paradigm stands in the service of his overall Christology, which is dominated by his belief in the heavenly exaltation of Christ at Easter (Zwiep, 1997). Luke’s consistent distinction between resurrection-exaltation and the ascension (rapture) was soon lost (starting with the longer ending of Mark).

Second-Century Sources

Justin Martyr is the first author to engage in an apology for the (reality and physicality of the) ascension of Jesus, and, while taking the heathen rapture myths as analogies to Christ’s ascension, his words show some reluctance if not embarrassment about the parallels (Just. 1 *Apol.* 21.1; 21.6). In the end, he dismissed the nonbiblical raptures as diabolic prefigurements and devilish imitations.

In the course of time, Luke’s unique contribution to the tradition of Jesus’ post-Easter career – the plastic depiction of the last post-resurrection appearance as a bodily rapture – was absorbed into a larger narrative-theological framework. Beginning in the early 2nd century CE, rapture and ascension language merged under canonical forces: the need for a dramatic closure of the earthly ministry of Jesus, the demands of a coherent theology, and belief in the unity of Scripture led many early Christian writers to harmonizing the various interpretations of Jesus’ postmortem fate. This is already the case in the many references to Jesus’ ascension in Justin (1 *Apol.* 21; 31; 42; 45; 46; 50; 51, 54; *Dial.* 17; 32; 37–39; 63 etc.).

Later Developments

From the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE onward, the physicality of the (bodily) ascension of Jesus was stressed in response to docetic (Docetism) and gnostic (Gnosis/Gnosticism) “spiritualizing” tendencies (e.g. Iren. *Haer.* 1.10.1; 24.4; 3.4.2; 5.31.2). But in the subsequent centuries, rapture thinking – in its crude, physical sense – gradually lost its attraction and credibility, especially facilitated by the biblical injunction that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 15:50), and by the escape route offered by allegorical interpretation

(Or. Or. 23.2). Possibly there are residual traces of the early Christian distinction between Christ's ascent/exaltation to heaven at Easter and his final leave taking at the ascension 40 days later (Acts 1:3) in the 12 articles of Christian faith. The ἀναβάντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς (Lat. *ascendit ad coelos*) of the Apostolicum echoes the earliest interpretation of Jesus' departure to heaven on Easter (Acts 2:32–36); the Greek Apostolicum does *not* employ the typically Lukan rapture language to describe Jesus' final leave taking (not ἀνελήμφθη εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν; Lat. *assumptus est in caelum*). If so, the sixth article is not to be taken as a direct reference to the Lukan ascension story. The distinction was soon lost, however. In time, the “rapture” of Jesus (= the final leave taking at the end of 40 days of appearances, Acts 1) became identified with the second stage of Christ's three-stage exaltation (between resurrection and heavenly exaltation), taken as *the* ascension (i.e. the one of Luke–Acts) and embedded in the larger salvation-historical and Christological scheme.

Historiography

The modern study of rapture and ascension to heaven started with the comprehensive studies by E. Rohde (1925) and V. Larrañaga (1938), but received its impetus especially by the work of G. Lohfink (1971). Subsequent studies built upon his work, in particular M.C. Parsons (1987) and A.W. Zwiép (1996). In more recent studies, spatial geography (Sleeman, 2009) and theology (Zwiép, 2016) come to the fore. Especially the various encyclopedic surveys by C. Colpe provide many religion-historical parallels (see below). The notion of deification (its origins and reception) is studied by N. Russell (2004). Many patristic texts on Jesus' ascension/rapture can be found in the work of J.G. Davies (1958), and in the reception-historical study of the ascension of Christ (Dunn et al., 2009), especially the entry by W. Kinzig on “Greek and Latin Patristics” (pp. 913–917).

Arie W. Zwiép

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