

Life and Teachings of Paul

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Encounter with the Risen Christ

Paul's conversion, as interpreted by him, is something of a curiosity. In Phil 3:12, Paul says, "Jesus Christ took hold of me." The expression "took hold of" is from a Greek word meaning, "to seize or apprehend." Paul was in the midst of putting a stop to a messianic heresy which was developing in Jerusalem: 3,000 Jews converted to it in Acts 2, then 2,000 more in Acts 4. Over 5,000 Jews had become convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. While Paul was seeking to apprehend members of this messianic sect, the risen Jesus apprehended him.

What did Paul mean by this way of describing his conversion to Christ? It would appear that he was drawn under the power or influence of this one he was seeking to destroy. That experience was later described by Paul as having led a "new creation," (2 Cor 5:17), wherein he had ceased to be Saul of Tarsus and had been recreated as Paul the apostle of Christ. Such a concept was not totally new; in fact, in the conversion of a gentile to Judaism, he became a proselyte by means of a change of identity. He was to forsake his identity as a pagan and a stranger to the covenants of Israel, and was to undergo circumcision (if a male) and then proselyte baptism (ritual purification), wherein he put away or changed his identity from "a stranger to the covenants" to "a son of the covenant." He was then given a new name and a new relationship to the people of Israel. A similar practice for initiating one into the community was observed by the Dead Sea sect at Qumran.

Paul understood the idea of a change of identity, but conversion to Christ in his understanding meant more than a change of one's relationship to a race of people. To Paul, conversion to Christ meant total a transformation of one's existence. This is reflected again and again in his interpretation of what he had experienced in his conversion to Christ.

Paul's conversion experience is recorded in three location in Acts of Apostles: first in Acts 9:3-9, where Luke records it as an historical event in the history of the early church; then, in Acts 22:6-16, where Paul, in the Temple in Jerusalem, tells his fellow Jews of his encounter with the risen Jesus; and then, in Acts 26:9-23, where Paul, during his hearing before King Agrippa, gives an account of his change from persecutor of Christ to apostle of Christ.

Paul's Vision of the Risen Jesus

Essentially, what Paul says happened was that the risen Jesus revealed himself to him in a wondrous and supernatural way. He saw Jesus "alive" after he had been "put to death" by crucifixion (1 Cor 9:1; 15:5-8; Acts 9:17; and 26:16). In each of these references the Greek word used to describe what Paul experienced is *hora'o*, which means literally seeing something. Paul actually saw something in the midst of that brilliant illumination on the road to Damascus, and what confronted him was something or someone of another existence; an otherworldly or heavenly "someone," who identified himself as "Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 22:8). This one who was a crucified Messiah was how revealed to Paul as a risen Lord.

How would one interpret such an experience? One's interpretation would depend on what he believed about the reality of supernatural phenomena and how such a phenomena could be known by beings within a natural realm of existence. The most common understanding of such a manifestation to a Jew of the first century would be that he was seeing "the glory of God." The Hebrew word for glory is *kabod*, meaning the radiance or illumination of God's presence, as was the case with the *Shechinah* that appeared to the children of Israel in the Sinai Desert (Exod 15:11; 16:7-19; 24:16-17;

33:18-23). So also in the NT, the glory of God is often a physical manifestation of his presence: 2 Cor 3:7-19, Col 3:4; 1 Tim 3:16. This motif is taken up by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. In fact, in Hebrews 1:3, the writer identifies Jesus as, “the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being,” (also Heb 2:7-9). In 2 Peter 1, Peter recalls having been given a glimpse of that glory the transfiguration.

*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17For **he received honor and glory from God the Father** when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." 18We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain (2 Peter 1:16-18).*

This is the event recorded in Luke 9,

*About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. 29As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and **his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.** 30Two men, Moses and Elijah, 31appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. 32Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, **they saw his glory** and the two men standing with him (Luke 9:28-32).*

What Peter is recalling in the transfiguration of Jesus is something of what Saul of Tarsus saw on the road to Damascus? The Scriptures are filled with examples of such supernatural manifestations.

Theophanies: Manifestations of God

There are numerous accounts of manifestations of God in the world called theophanies (i.e. manifestations of God): Exodus 3:1-

4:17; 14:21-15:21; 16:10ff; 19:16-25; 33:17-24:8; 2 Chron 6:40-7:3; Isaiah 6:1-5; Ezekiel 1:1-28; 43:1-5; Daniel 7:9-14.

The Malach Yahweh Tradition

In the Hebrew Scriptures we read of appearances of **the angel of the Lord**: Genesis 19:1, 13; 22:11-18; 18:2, 22; and **the angel of deliverance** in Genesis 48:15-16; Exodus 3:2ff. Also, there are NT references to the **appearances of angelic beings**: Matt 1:18-25; 2:13-14; 28:1-7; Luke 1:8-17, 26-38; 2:8-15; 24:1-7; and John 20:11-13.

Heavenly Beings of Apocalyptic Literature

Another consideration comes from a body of Jewish apocalyptic writings called Pseudepi'grapha (*pseudo*-false, *grapha* - writing), which were filled with depictions of heavenly beings; especially, beings who appeared in light. In a first century BC writing titled, *Joseph and Aseneth*, chapters 14-17, a heavenly being in the form of a human being appears in a resplendent light to **Aseneth** Joseph's Egyptian wife, who is converted to Judaism by the aid of this heavenly being. This heavenly being is described in chapter 14 as follows:

And **Aseneth** raised her head and saw, and behold there was a man in every respect similar to Joseph, by the robe and the crown and the royal staff, except that his face was like lightening, and his eyes like sunshine, and the hair of his head like a flame of fire of a burning torch, and hands and feet like iron shining forth from a fire, and sparks shot forth from his hands and feet (*Joseph and Aseneth*, 14:9).

In 2 Enoch 1:1ff, Enoch's ascent into heaven is described wherein heavenly beings appear to him as men whose faces were shining like the sun, their whole being was illuminated with bright light. This literature gives us an example of how the Jews of the first century understood earthly manifestations of heavenly beings.

Also of significance are the descriptions of the appearance of heavenly beings in the NT; especially, how the risen Jesus is described in various NT texts: Matt 28:8-10, 16-20; Luke 24:13-15, 30-31, 33-35, 36-39, 51; Acts 7:54-56, 59; 9:3-9 (especially verse 20 for how Paul interpreted what he saw); 22:6-14; 26:12-19; the most revealing being the appearance of Jesus in the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-33; Matt 17:1-2). The description of the risen Jesus in the book of the Revelation of John is consistent with what Paul saw (Rev 1:12-16). Others saw what Paul saw but in a different context.

Aftermath of Paul's Encounter

There are some interesting points worthy of discussion here. If Paul accepted the traditional interpretation of Deut 21:22-23, which stated that anyone hung on a tree (e.g. one crucified) was cursed or condemned of God, then the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth was proof that he was not sent by God. He was not the Messiah, he was not a prophet of God, and he was clearly not the Son of God, as he was purported to have claimed in his appearance before the Sanhedrin (Matt 26:63-66; Mark 14:60-64; Luke 22:66-71). In view of this reasoning, Jesus of Nazareth had to be a messianic pretender, a deceiver, a blasphemer condemned of God, and his death was proof of it.

However, Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus proved all of these presuppositions erroneous. Numerous others were wrong as well: the Sanhedrin consisting of the High Priest, the chief priests, and the elders of Israel. So also were the views of many of Israel's leading scholars, including the sages of his own theological party, the Pharisees.

All of the synagogues having rejected Jesus' claims had erred in their judgment; from the *archesunagogai* (rulers of the synagogues) to the rabbis and their *talmidim* (disciples), all were wrong about the identity of this person, Jesus of Nazareth. How this could have happened was a question Paul spent the rest of his life trying to explain.

God had not rejected Jesus of Nazareth; in fact, he had vindicated him by reversing what the Jewish hierarchy and Romans had done to him. They had crucified him, God had brought him back to life, an act of divine reversal, which became a major theme in the letters of Paul. Now, the question for Paul was this, "When confronted with the fact that what one has believed to be true is not true, what is he to do?"

Saul could have reacted in numerous ways. He could have rejected everything he had experienced in his encounter with Jesus and attempted to rationalize it or explain it away, as did so many who witnessed the wonders of Jesus and refused to believe what they were seeing: the exorcisms, healings, even the return of life to the dead son of the widow of Nain and Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary.

He could have suppressed what he had seen out of the fear of being discredited by the Jewish hierarchy, losing the esteem he had worked so hard to attain. What he did, however, was to accept the obvious conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, that he was sent from God, and that he was, in fact, who he acknowledged himself to be before the Sanhedrin, the very Son of God.

Conclusion

Saul of Tarsus had changed his mind, which is the meaning of the Greek word *metanae'ō*, translated "repent" in English translations; and more, he had been converted, which in Greek is the word, *epistre'phō* meaning, "to turn from one direction to another." Paul asked the voice in the light what he was to do and then did it. As he said later to King Agrippa, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). From that moment, the existence of Saul of Tarsus began to be transformed from his old existence "in Adam" to a new existence "in Christ."

From this moment on, Saul of Tarsus saw himself as a man who had been apprehended by the risen Jesus, who had become a devoted servant to this one he now confessed as "Lord" - "*Adonai*," "*Kurios*,"

It has been suggested by numerous Pauline scholars that the whole of Paul's theology was rooted in what happened to him on the way to Damascus. He was now a new creation in Christ, the old had gone, all things had become new! (2 Cor 5:17)

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