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A Damascus Road Experience?

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There is a phrase which is sometimes used in evangelical circles: a Damascus road experience. Recently in a radio discussion I heard this phrase used when one minister said that he would not accept another as a minister if he had not had a Damascus road experience. What is such an experience? Is the use of the term justified in such circumstances? The experience is described in Acts. It is not directly described in the Pauline letters but its theological significance is reflected on. We shall look then first at Acts. /1

Acts contains three accounts of what happened to Paul: 9.1-19; 22.4-16; 26.9-18. There has been much discussion whether these describe a conversion or a commission or if as is highly probable both are intended. Which is primary?

The accounts differ in detail but agree on the central conversation between Jesus and Paul:

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?". And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

It is not clear whether Paul alone heard Jesus (22.9) or also those journeying with him (9.7), whether he alone saw the light (20.11) or whether those also with him (22.9; 26.13 - strangely unlike Paul they are not made blind by the light). These variations are not significant for the present examination for there is no indication that anyone other than Paul saw Jesus. We can safely conclude that Paul's experience was quite different from that of any of his fellow-travellers.

In the forty days after the resurrection and prior to the Ascension Luke says that Jesus appeared to the disciples (1.3) It is customary to describe these as appearances of the risen Jesus while those which took place after Jesus had ascended as appearances of the glorified or exalted Lord. Presumably it was then the glorified Lord whom Paul saw on the road to Damascus. There are at least two other occasions when the glorified Lord appeared to Paul strengthening and instructing him when in Jerusalem (22.21; 23.11 - some believe that 16.9

was also an appearance of the risen Lord). On at least one other occasion the glorified Lord appeared to a believer and spoke with him, ie when Ananias had a vision of the Lord and heard him speak (9.10-16). Appearances of the glorified Lord were therefore not restricted to the Damascus road experience of Paul but only in that experience are they connected with the conversion of an unbeliever. Ananias as a believer received a limited commission to carry out a precise task.

When we look at the other instances of individual conversion in Acts (Cornelius, Sergius Paulus, the Philippian jailer, etc) we do not find that these are accompanied by visions or appearances of the risen Lord. When we examine the individual commissions to continuous work there are again no appearances. When the "Seven" are set apart (6.1-6) the initiative comes from the Twelve. When Paul and Barnabas are separated for mission work it is the Holy Spirit who calls the church in Antioch to take action (13.1-3). Nowhere else in the NT is there any suggestion that an appearance of the glorified Lord is necessary before anyone can be called to exercise a function within the Christian community.

The commission given to Paul, to be God's witness to the Gentiles, is included in the conversation between Jesus and Paul in Acts 26.16-18. In the account of Acts 9 it is given to Paul through Ananias (9.15). In Acts 22 it is apparently given both through Ananias (22.15) and directly to Paul by the Lord when Paul is praying in the Temple (22.21). Despite these variations in the account of the giving of the commission there is complete agreement that it was a commission to evangelize the Gentiles and that directly or indirectly through Ananias it was connected with the Damascus road experience.

Before we leave Acts we should note another aspect of the experience. This may be brought out by a contrast with Matthew. That gospel ends with the promise of the Lord to be with his followers always (20.28). There is no similar promise in Luke's gospel. In Luke 24.29 the promise of the Father is of course the gift of the Holy Spirit fulfilled at Pentecost. Acts does not contain such a promise. We

might have expected it at the moment Jesus left his disciples to ascend into heaven; there is a promise, though not given by Jesus but by "angels", but it is of the final return of the Lord. When we read through Acts we indeed find that the presence of the glorified Lord with believers is not stressed. Indeed the guiding, counselling, strengthening presence of the Holy Spirit is emphasized throughout. The Lord only appears a few times, as in the Damascus road experience of Paul. Thus the unique nature of that experience is emphasized.

Paul does not describe his experience in any of his letters, presumably because he had already told his churches about it when he first visited and evangelized them. There are, however, a number of clear references to it and a number of other less certain references. The accepted references are found in 1 Cor.9.1; 15.8-10; Gal 1.13-17; Phil. 3.4-11. Of these the most detailed is 1 Cor 15.8-10 and we now look at this in detail.

The reference to Paul's experience on the Damascus road comes at the end of a list of those to whom Jesus had appeared after his resurrection. This list is intended both to emphasize the importance of the resurrection of Jesus for believers and to stress its certainty. Jesus is said to have appeared to Peter, the Twelve, more than five hundred brethren (apparently all at the same time), James, and all the apostles. To this list which came to him from Christian tradition Paul added his own name. It is normally assumed that the appearances of the risen Lord other than that to Paul took place before the Ascension. Paul never describes the event of the Ascension, as distinct from drawing out its theological significance. Thus we cannot be sure Paul thought of Jesus' appearance to him in relation to it. However it seems certain that Paul regards his own experience on the Damascus road as on a par with the others in the list he provides. The one who appeared to him then was the risen Jesus. That he considered his experience to be the same as those of the others is confirmed by 1 Cor 9.1 where he claims an equality with Peter as an apostle because he had seen the Lord. That he saw the risen Lord seems also to be implied in Gal 1.16, "(God) was pleased

to reveal his son to me."

Within 1 Cor 15.8 there are two expressions which require a little further examination. Of the first of these, "last of all", C.K. Barrett writes /2 that it "could be taken to mean 'least in importance '", and this would agree with verse 9, but at the end of a list, punctuated by then...then...then, the other possible meaning of the word must be accepted." Paul then claims that up to the time he wrote the last person to see the risen Jesus was himself. He probably also implies that he has been the last person ever, ie right up to our time and on to the end of the world, to see the risen Jesus.

The second expression *ektromati* has been variously translated into English. It probably means something like "an abortion". This can hardly be taken in a strictly literal sense but might signify that he had been born before his time or without the preparation necessary, the preparation which the other apostles had through their earthly fellowship with Jesus. It is likely that the term was not his own choice but had been used about him by his critics "that he was as much an ugly parody of a true apostles as an abortion is of a healthy infant born at the proper time." /3

Both these expressions therefore indicate that there is something exceptional in the case of Paul which will not be repeated in the case of others. This is confirmed when we look at it another way. As we have seen Matt 28.20 promises a continuous presence of the risen Christ with believers. We find this also in Paul though he expresses it in other ways. The believer is "in Christ"; he died with Christ and lives with him; he is a member of the Body of Christ. He thus enjoys a continual fellowship with Christ but this does not involve seeing the risen Christ as Paul did on the road to Damascus. Paul enjoyed a continual existence in and with Christ. He also had one special experience which he records in 1 Cor 15.8-10. This was one in a list of discrete events happening to a limited number of people and never to be repeated. Paul thus envisages a clear distinction between this one event on the Damascus road and his ever-present fellowship with the Lord. He does not expect others to enjoy an appearance of the risen Lord but he does

expect them to be conscious of daily fellowship with him. The once-for-all nature of the Damascus road experience is brought out again by the tense of the verb (aorist) which he uses in Gal 1.16. The same tense is used in 2 Cor 4.6 ("has shone in our hearts") and many commentators think that Paul has his conversion and calling experience in mind here (he often uses the plural when he is only referring to himself).

There does appear to be one other reference to the experience in Eph 3.1-13. It is not however certain that this letter was written by Paul. If not, it shows how early Christian tradition regarded his call. In this passage "Paul" is writing of his special position as the steward of God in respect of the Gentiles and says that the "mystery" that the gospel was intended for Gentiles "was made known to me by revelation". There is no reference here to the appearance of Christ to Paul but the importance of the event is seen in the commission given to Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Whether Paul fully understood his commission to go to the Gentiles in one brilliant flash of enlightenment at the moment of the Damascus road experience is another matter. He may only gradually have come to realize what it meant but he traces the beginning of that understanding to the event on the way to Damascus.

We are now ready to draw conclusions. Whether what we read in Acts of the Damascus road experience and what we read in Paul's letters totally agree there is no doubt that both emphasize the uniqueness of the event. This uniqueness is twofold: (i) the risen or glorified Christ appeared to Paul in a way in which he did not normally make himself known either to unbelievers or believers and Paul did not expect to be continually renewing this experience. (ii) Paul was given a commission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Would anyone claim a similar twofold experience today? It remains possible that Christ in his glory may have appeared to a few individuals and Luke does not rule out this possibility but the commission to go to the Gentiles does not need to be given again. All humankind have been included now in the scope of the gospel. Perhaps if there do turn out to be little green

men in space ships another commission may be necessary in order to persuade us that the gospel is also intended for them. Until that need arises there is no reason to ask of ourselves or of other Christians whether we or they have had Damascus road experiences. It would be more sensible to enquire whether we had had a Philippian jail experience or a Gaza road experience (Acts 16.15ff; 8.26ff) In fact all experiences of Christ are unique to the person who has them and cannot be categorized into one or other of the few simple forms we find in Scripture.

Notes

1. The most recent discussion on the Damascus road experience will be found in Seyoon Kim, The Origin of Paul's Gospel, Eerdmans 1982, pp 1-66
2. C.K. Barrett, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, A & C Black 1968, p344
3. Cf F.F. Bruce, 1 & 2 Corinthians, (The New Century Bible) Marshall, Morgan & Scott 1971, ad loc.