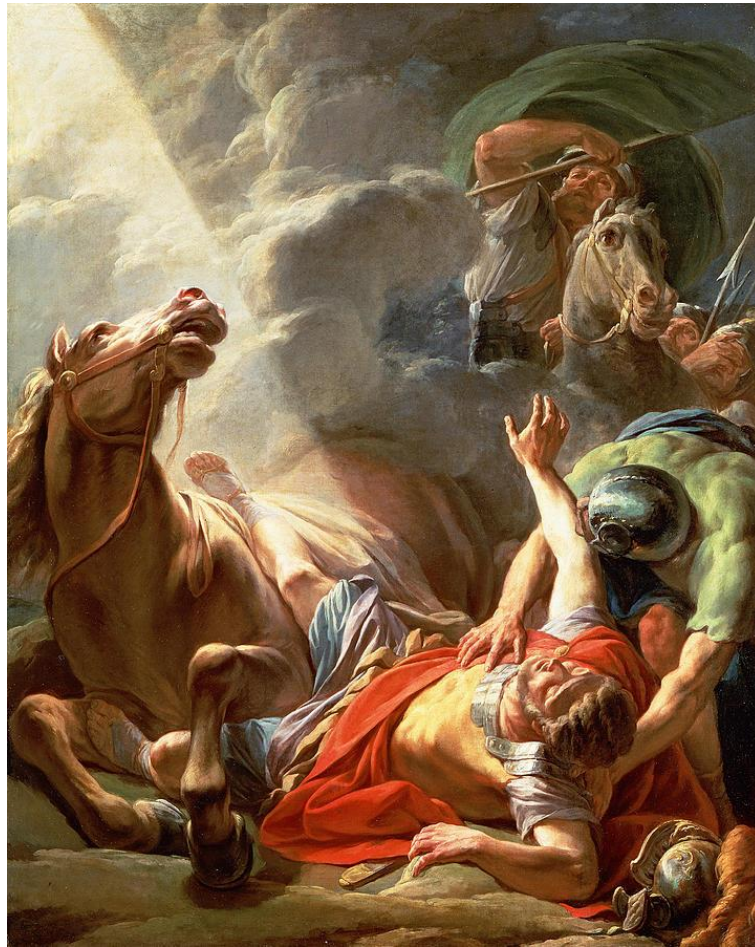


## The Apostle Paul at Damascus



Acts 9:1 "Saul (who is later called Paul), still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any (Christian Jews) who belonged to the Way (as Christianity was called then), men or women, he might bring them bound (back) to Jerusalem."

To reconstruct the historical St. Paul, one must make a careful comparison and a delicate assessment of the two main New Testament sources that we have for him, namely, the letters of

St. Paul and St. Luke's Acts of the Apostles. Here one must always recognize the differences in those sources, differences in the intentions of their respective authors, and differences in their historical situations. Both Luke and Paul, however, do connect the city of Damascus to the inaugural event of Paul's dramatic revelation from God that changed his life forever, but the two authors do so very differently in terms of Paul's vision of the Resurrected Jesus, and also, in terms of Paul's subsequent mandate as an apostle to the Gentiles. And both these differences are major theological ones, not just minor historical details.

Luke's account for Paul's vision of the Resurrected Jesus, while still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, is the more famous "on the road to Damascus" story, which Luke records three times in Acts, first as it happens in the narrative in chapter 9 (1-19), then, as Paul recounts it to the Roman officer in Jerusalem in chapter 22 (3-21), and finally as Paul tells it to the Jewish king, Agrippa II at Caesarea Maritima in chapter 26 (1-18).

There are two major problems with Luke's version of the event. First, as we see in today's reading from Acts, Luke claims that Paul's vocational revelation occurred as he traveled *from* Jerusalem to Damascus with high priestly authority to bring dissident Jewish Christians back to Jerusalem in chains (9.1-2, 22.4-5, 26.9-12). That is quite unlikely though, since the

Jerusalem high priest lacked any power to dispense capital punishment, or to exercise any authority in Syria, where Damascus is located, far from Jerusalem. Thus, Luke's vision of the "on the Road to Damascus" experience is likely a fiction of some kind, serving his literary purposes, but not necessarily historical ones, in the same way perhaps that there is in most medieval paintings of this famous scene (see your bulletin cover today, for example) there is always a horse seen with Paul, again very unlikely for an itinerant preacher of that time, but one which serves the expectations of the artist!

Secondly, Luke's well-known and consistent description of that vision emphasizes that what Paul saw was "a light from heaven" and what Paul heard was "the voice of Christ," as recorded in all three of his versions of that story (9.3-4, 22.6-7, 26.13-14). In other words, for Luke in Acts with this well-known three-fold account repeated, Paul saw a light from heaven, but not the Lord, and heard only the voice of Christ, but never saw his face.

Paul's own account of his resurrection appearance of Jesus in Damascus is significantly different from that. In his letter to the Galatians Paul writes of the event, "I received (the gospel) through a revelation of Jesus Christ . . . I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it . . . when God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles . . . I went

away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus" three years later (Acts 1.11-17, cf. Gal. 1.17-18). There is nothing in Paul's account about high priestly authorized documents and travels to Damascus with the right of rendition back to Jerusalem, rather it appears that Paul was living in Damascus at the time of his vision and persecuting Jewish Christians there, most likely within the city's famous synagogue.

Luke reports that Paul only heard the voice of Christ while Paul insists again and again that he actually saw the resurrected Jesus, and it was the sight of Christ that makes him an apostle, writing in First Corinthians, "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (9.1). Indeed, it is the very sight of Christ in his mind that puts Paul on a par with the Twelve Apostles, writing later in that same letter, "Last of all, as to one untimely born, (Jesus) appeared also to me (the Greek here literally translates: "was seen"). For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (15.8-9).

This simple disagreement between Paul and Luke as to what the former actually saw in Damascus leads directly to the disagreement in the early Church about Paul's authority as a Christian apostle. An "apostle" is a person literally "sent", as the word means in Greek, but by whom is Paul "sent" then? According to Paul, he is called and sent directly by the

resurrected Jesus, just as were the original Twelve Apostles, but according to Luke, Paul has no such status or authority. According to Luke's account, Paul is only an apostle 'sent' with Barnabas by the Christian community in Antioch, first to Jerusalem, and then later, on their so-called First Missionary Journey to Asia Minor. In Acts (13.1-3), Luke records the story as this, "In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called the Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While (the congregation) was worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying, (the leaders of the church at Antioch) laid their hands on (Barnabas and Saul) and sent them off" ('sent them,' that is, made them 'apostles'). And so later in Acts, Luke himself calls Barnabas and Paul "apostles" a few times, for example at Iconium and Lystra (14.4, 14). Also note in Acts that Barnabas' name always comes first when he and Paul are listed together, as though he was the leader of the two. Indeed, when the people in Lystra and Derbe saw the miracles that the two of them wrought, they thought they were the Greek Gods in human forms, and consequently they called Barnabas, "Zeus" after the chief of the gods, and Paul, "Hermes," after the lesser, messenger god. Paul was apparently the more impressive speaker

between the two of them, but Barnabas was clearly in charge in their eyes!

Thus, for the most part, Luke in Acts reserves the special term "apostles" exclusively for the Twelve, which included the important story of replacing Judas after his death with St. Matthias, thus keeping the number of Apostles to twelve (1.21-22, 26). They were then a closed male group all called by Jesus at the very start of his public ministry, and into that group Paul could never enter.

For Luke, Paul is emphatically not a real "apostle" sent by any personal revelation made directly to him by God or Christ. Paul, though, repeatedly identifies himself at the beginning of several of his letters as an "apostle" sent by God and Christ. He does so in the very first verse of the letter to the Romans, in Galatians, and again in both epistles to the Corinthians (e.g. Rom. 1.1, 1 Cor. 1.1, 2 Cor. 2.1, Gal. 1.1). Furthermore, Paul explicitly insists that his own apostolic authority is just as valid as that of the Twelve and that, besides them, there are many other apostles, including himself, writing: "(the Resurrected) Christ appeared to Cephas (that is Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James (presumably the brother of Jesus), then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of

the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor. 15.5-9). Thus, if you are among "the least of the apostles," you are still an apostle. And this disagreement over Paul's apostolicity haunts the pages again and again in Luke's Book of Acts, and in the various letters of the New Testament, and ultimately derives from the very different accounts of that initial revelation of the resurrected Jesus to St. Paul at Damascus from our New Testament story today.

In conclusion, one must ask how the author of the Book of Acts could provide such a different account of Paul's conversion experience and apostolic authority, if Acts was indeed written by St. Luke, the physician, who accompanied Paul on many of his journeys and would have heard the story directly from him, probably more than once? The modern consensus of biblical scholars then is that the attribution of authorship of the anonymous Book of Acts to Luke is later, and not likely, primarily because of this and other discrepancies with details from Paul's letters. Knowing this difference clearly helps the reader of the New Testament understand some of the tensions and concerns of the early Christian Church, which was somewhat divided and not at all like the acclamation Luke boldly describes in Acts, writing that "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul," a standard often mistakenly applied to the Church in later times again and again.

Realizing this difference between Paul's account and Luke's of his revelation in Damascus is, I believe, the very value of Adult Bible Study, as opposed to just hearing fragments of stories in church on Sundays and occasional sermons on the matter. And if this kind of analysis intrigues you, then please consider joining us on Fridays, as we are currently just starting to study and to learn more about the real, historical Paul. Amen.