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PAUL'S CALL TO BE AN APOSTLE

The scene of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus reported by Luke three times in Acts of the Apostles (9:3–19; 22:6–16; 26:12–18) is familiar even to those who have never read the Bible. Such familiarity is often "spurious" because it finds little to no support in Luke's version and even less in Paul's references to the same event (Gal 1:15–16; 1 Cor 15:8–9; 2 Cor 4:6; Phil 3:12). What really happened to Paul on that occasion?

LUKE AND PAUL

Contemporary biblical scholars are generally agreed that Acts of the Apostles is not a reliable source for factual information about Paul¹. In Acts, Luke has intentionally reshaped Paul into a different person than the one he actually was. The historical Paul was neither a citizen of Rome (Acts 22:25) nor of Tarsus (Acts 21:39). If he factually had been a Roman citizen, it would have been impossible for Paul to receive as many public beatings as he reports (e.g., 2 Cor 11:24–25). This and similar information about the historical Paul uncovered by contemporary biblical scholars is readily available in many studies and commentaries. What then can be said about Luke's thrice told (and interpreted) report of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus?

The one common element in the reports of Luke and Paul is that Paul's call by God most definitely occurred in an altered state of consciousness², something Paul experienced more than once in his life (see 2 Cor 12:7)³. This is not surprising, since tradition notes that God routinely

¹ E. W. Stegemann, W. Stegemann. *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of its First Century*, Minneapolis 1999, p. 297–302.

² See: M. Winkelmann, *Altered States of Consciousness and Religious Behavior*, [in:] *Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Stephen D. Glazier, London–Westport 1997, p. 393–428.

³ See: J. J. Pilch, *Paul's Ecstatic Trance Experience near Damascus in Acts of the Apostles*, "Hervormde Theologische Studies" 58:2002, p. 690–707.

communicates with human beings in this way. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision” (or experience of God in an altered state of consciousness; 1 Sam 3:1). Luke knew how Paul had learned about what the God of Israel was doing in Jesus of Nazareth (Gal 1:15–16; 1 Cor 15:8–9). He then fashioned a report different from Paul’s which nevertheless accords perfectly well with the patterned human experience known as ecstatic trance, one of many different altered states of consciousness of which human beings are capable⁴. Indeed, Luke reports more than twenty instances of group and individual experiences of altered states of consciousness in Acts of the Apostles⁵. He was obviously familiar with the experience and knew how to report it according to the cultural paradigm.

THREE STAGES OF TRANCE EXPERIENCE

A trance is but one type of an altered state of consciousness. Psychological anthropologists identify three stages in a trance experience⁶. In the first or mildest level of this altered state of consciousness, the visionary perceives light and geometric patterns. This shift in consciousness from customary to mildly altered is often induced by intense concentration. Those who drive motor vehicles are familiar with “road trance.” Intense concentration on the journey and the route causes the mind to shift awareness to another level. The driver arrives at the destination having observed all the laws and having followed the correct route but doesn’t recall the journey because the mind was thinking of something else.

After witnessing the murder of Stephen (Acts 7:58–8:1), Paul engaged fully in persecuting believers in Jesus Messiah. “Ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (Acts 8:1–3). On the road to Damascus, even if he was only walking (no beast is mentioned), Paul was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). There can be no doubt that the topic and person which intensely engaged Paul’s mind was Jesus, whom he considered to be a fraud, and in light of his crucifixion, quite clearly not beloved or approved by God.

⁴ S. Krippner, *Altered States of Consciousness*, [in:] *The Highest State of Consciousness*, ed. J. White, New York 1972, p. 1–5,

⁵ J. J. Pilch, *How the Early Believers Experienced God: Vision and Healing in Acts of the Apostles*, Collegeville, MN. 2004.

⁶ D. Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, London 2002, p. 126–130.

The bright light from the sky (Acts 9:3; 22:6) even brighter than the sun (Acts 26:13) is a sign of a shift in Paul's consciousness. Whether this happened as a matter of fact, or whether Luke is creating this account, Paul's level of awareness was shifting, and Paul was aware of it. Experts in neurology point out that colors reflect different waves in the brain which signals a shift in levels of consciousness. The light color indicates trance to anyone – scientist or layperson – familiar with such experiences⁷.

In the second stage of a trance experience, the visionary seeks to impose meaning on what she or he is seeing. In the Israelite tradition, light was associated with God, God's honor or glory, and/or the realm of God (e.g., Isa 60:1). Paul the Pharisee knew that God or someone from the realm of God was attempting to communicate with him. In imposing meaning on the vision, the visionary also provides the "sound track." In other words, the content of the message will flow from the latent discourse of the culture.

Paul the Pharisee was so focused on the crucified, and therefore shamed, Jesus Messiah, that the context was ripe for Jesus Messiah to communicate with him. Paul, "breathing threats" (Acts 9:1) and in "raging fury against [believers in Jesus]" (Acts 26:11) was certainly obsessed with Jesus and his deceived followers. Paul's activity was rooted in his Torah-based conviction that these fellow members of the House of Israel were not at all faithful to the God of the Covenant. Thus, the dialogue between Paul and the risen Jesus emerges from Paul's emotional state and the circumstances of his commission to hunt down and imprison those who believe in Jesus.

Scholars note that the dialogue between risen Jesus and Paul appears with little variation in all three accounts. Traditional biblical scholarship has identified this as a "dialogue with apparition literary form" with a very consistent and discernible tri-partite structure⁸. Basically there is the question of Jesus ("why do you persecute me?"), the response of Paul ("Who are you Lord?"), and the self-presentation of Jesus ("I am Jesus, the one whom you are persecuting") following which Jesus assigns Paul a task or mission.

But is this literary form nothing more than a literary device serving to describe an encounter with God, an angel, or other beings from the realm of God? Once again, psychological anthropology suggests that a literary

⁷ E. G. d' Aquili, A. B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Proving the Biology of Religious Experience*. Minneapolis 1999.

⁸ G. Lohfink, *The conversion of St. Paul: Narrative and History in Acts*. Translated and edited by Bruce J. Malina. Chicago 1976.

form predictably presents the pattern of a Mediterranean cultural behavioral experience. This is how Mediterranean people have learned to shape such an experience, and how to describe it. Every culture prescribes predictable behavior patterns in common experiences. Thus the culture, or the social system prescribes the appropriate behavioral pattern by which shifts in levels of awareness, that is, altered states of consciousness, should be experienced and interpreted.

The actual dialogue reported in Acts is quite likely not a verbatim report entrusted at some time by Paul to Luke. It is rather, as scholars note, facts-with-interpretation. Paul experienced the risen Jesus in an altered state of consciousness (fact) and interpreted that experience in some way. Luke cast the interpretation into the form of this dialogue. Of course, it is also possible that Paul reported his interpretation by means of this dialogue, but his own comments in his letters never give any such indication. It is impossible to determine where in Luke's reports the facts end and the interpretation begins, but it is important to keep in mind that a factual event underlies the report.

The upshot of Paul's experience is that he realizes how mistaken he has been. If Jesus speaks with him from the realm of God, then Jesus was approved rather than condemned or rejected by God. Jesus is indeed the Messiah to come. The result of the experience in each of these three reports is easy to see. First, a dramatic change took place in Paul's understanding of Jesus. Second, Paul was entrusted by God with a new mission (or new missions). These are two very common results of trance experiences in all cultures: the visionary receives new insight into a problem or an answer to a nagging questions; or the visionary is enlightened about and empowered to take a new direction in life⁹

PAUL'S VIEW OF HIS CALL

In his authentic letters, Paul understands himself as a "holy person" called by God to a specific task. Anthropologists have called such a person a "shaman," but this is just one cultural example of a holy person among the Siberian Tungus which is actually a phenomenon that exists in all cultures. The process of becoming a holy person involves six elements¹⁰.

⁹ J. J. Pilch, *Altered States of Consciousness Events in the Synoptics*, [in:] *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, edd. Bruce J. Malina, Wolfgang Stegemann, Gerd Theissen, Minneapolis 2002, p. 113.

¹⁰ J. J. Pilch, *Altered States of Consciousness...*, p. 6-7.

1. A spirit contacts the candidate to possess or adopt him.

Paul believes that God selected him already from conception. God “from my mother’s womb had set me apart and called me through his grace” (Gal 1:15). With allusions to Isaiah (41:1) and Jeremiah (1:5), Paul sets and understands himself to have been selected for a prophetic ministry just as were these giants in the tradition.

2. Identification of the possessing or adopting spirit.

It is clear in some of the opening greetings of his letters, that Paul understood that it was the God of Israel who selected him for his ministry. “Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God...” (Rom 1:1; see also Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1;).

3. Acquisition of necessary ritual skills.

Where and how did Paul learn to be a holy man? Certainly in part from his heritage as a Pharisee. “[...] in observance of the Law a Pharisee”, he wrote, “in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the Law I was blameless” (Phil 3:5–6). Two kinds of holy people existed in the Israelite tradition: the *saddiq* was one who sought to please God by keeping all commandments (later Pharisees identified 613), while the *hasid* sought to go even beyond that. Paul appears to include himself in the first category and quite likely the second as well.

4. Tutelage by both a spirit and real-life teacher.

In Acts 13:2, the Spirit selected Barnabas and Paul for special ministry. While Paul declares his independence of all human counsel (e.g., Gal 1:12, 16–17, etc), there are indications that he did have real-life teachers apart from his training in Pharisaism. He admits that he spent fifteen days with Kephas (Gal 1:18). It is plausible that during this fortnight, Kephas, himself a holy man by Israelite reckoning, not only taught Paul about the earthly Jesus whom Paul knew only from the Jesus followers whom he persecuted but also taught him the ritual skills which a holy person must master, e.g., inducing and interpreting altered states of consciousness experience, healing, and casting out evil spirits. Moreover, Acts 9:20 and 27 suggest that Ananias and Barnabas also served as teachers of Paul. Of course, Paul’s principal spirit teacher is none other than God. Paul is convinced that God personally revealed the significance of Jesus to him (Gal 1:11, 15–16). Paul does not relate the nature of that contact or that revelation. It may be similar to what Luke described in Acts or it may be different. Yet God is clearly Paul’s primary instructor.

5. Growing familiarity with the possessing or adopting spirit.

In his communication with the community in Corinth, Paul refers to his “abundance of revelations” (2 Cor 12:7). Since this letter is dated (57 A.D.) roughly twenty-three years after his call (34 A.D.), Paul has had at least that many years of experience, thus a growing familiarity with God and the realm of God through trance experiences.

6. On-going trance experiences.

As just indicated, Paul refers to an abundance of revelations (2 Cor 12:7), hence experiences that lasted throughout his life. Moreover, Paul also was gifted with glossolalia, a phenomenon that takes place in altered states of consciousness (1 Cor 14:8)¹¹; see Goodman 1972). Paul also took sky journeys 2 Cor 12:1–4, about which we will say more below.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HOLY MAN (*saddiq* or *hasid*)

It is difficult to develop a simple and workable definition of a holy man across cultures. For this reason, after analyzing ethnographic data deriving from world cultures, anthropologists have identified a nucleus of eight elements that characterize a holy man in all cultures. The first five of these elements are essential, core, or central elements. The next three are related to the first five¹².

In general, a holy man exists only in a culture where spirits are considered to cause problems in the human world, and where people believe that only other spirits can correct these problems. The holy man is recognized as an intermediary between the realm of the spirits and the world in which human beings reside. In the Bible, a holy man is an intermediary between the realm of God and the world of human beings. The holy man brokers power and favors from beings who abide in the realm of God to human beings in their realm. Thus familiarity with spirits and mastery over or control of spirits as already noted, especially evil spirits as in exorcism, is essential to a holy man.

1. A holy man has direct contact or communication with spirits.

Anthropologists note that spirits can be sentient beings (animal or human like spirits), forces of nature, or *transcendent* energy. In the Bible,

¹¹ F. D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia*. Chicago 1972.

¹² B. J. Malina, J. J. Pilch, *Social Science Commentary on Revelation*, Minneapolis 2000, p. 6–7.

God is the principal spirit with whom a holy man has contact, though a holy man may also communicate with other spirits in the realm of God (e.g., angels). This is clearly true of Paul. "We. [Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy] were judged worthy by God to be entrusted with the gospel" (1 Thess 2:4). God personally revealed the Son to Paul (Gal 1:16; see also Gal 1:12). Paul advised the Thessalonians about the fate of those who have died, "on the word of the Lord" (1 Thess 4:15). Moreover, Paul not only communicated with the realm of God but was obedient to it. He journeyed to Jerusalem "in accord with a revelation [from the realm of God]" (Gal 2:2). A holy man will have one or more special helping spirits for assistance and protection. For Paul, the Spirit (of God) seems to play this role. In describing the things he proclaimed among the Corinthians, Paul says "this God has revealed to us through the Spirit ... and we speak about them not with words taught by human wisdom, but with words taught by the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:10, 13).

2. Control of or power over the spirit.

In Paul's encounters with beings from the realm of God, the world of the spirits, he is never actually controlled by any of the personages he experiences. However, in accord with circum-Mediterranean cultures in general and Israelite ideology in particular, Paul does not hesitate to attribute some of life's reversals to Satan, an Israelite specific personification of a hostile force testing loyalty to God. For instance, he claimed that Satan hindered his intended trip to visit the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:18). We do not know what the real obstacle was, but Paul's statement does not indicate that that particular spirit controlled his life. Rather that mischievous or malicious spirit set events in motion which forced him to change his plans. Or on another occasion, Paul identified Satan as the one who was responsible for some unknown personal physical problem (2 Cor 12:7). This, too, is in line with Israelite ideology in which every effect must have a personal cause. If no human agent can be identified, then the agent must be other than human. Early on, Israelites believed that God was responsible for human well being as well as illness (Exod 15:26). By the first century, evils spirits of various sorts were considered responsible for human illness, as the gospels clearly testify (e.g., Luke 9:39)¹³, while Satan tested loyalties to God (e.g. Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). Paul the holy man nowhere indicates that any spirit has control over him, though nowhere in his letters does he discuss his power over spirits as Luke

¹³ See: J. J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology*, Minneapolis 2000.

reports (Acts 16:18). On the other hand, he does claim to have performed among the Corinthians “signs of an apostle... signs and wonders, and mighty deeds” (2 Cor 12:12; see also Rom 15:19). These would include acts of healing as well as casting out spirits.

3. Control of the altered state of consciousness through which the holy man contacts the unseen world.

While in his altered states of consciousness, a holy man remains aware of where he is and what is going on around him. He is aware of his trance experiences. Paul admits that he has the gift of glossolalia (1 Cor 14:18), a gift from God. And he also recognizes that trance experiences require interpretation, something contemporary psychological anthropologists have observed in their research. Paul the holy man urges those who have the gift of glossolalia to pray also for the gift of interpretation (1 Cor 14:13).

4. A holy man possesses a “this worldly” focus on the material world.

The authentic holy man across cultures does not seek to enhance his or her reputation or any sort of personal aggrandizement. The gifts of a holy man are intended for the benefit of the group he serves. Paul makes that quite clear especially in his discussion of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12). God inspires them in every one (1 Cor 12:6) for the common good (1 Cor 12:7).

5. A holy man often takes sky journeys (often called “soul flight” by anthropologists) that is, trips to the realm of God and throughout that realm. Such spirit world travelers take these journeys while both feet are planted firmly on the ground, a common and documented experience of holy persons in all cultures. Often a tutelary spirit or “familiar” helps in this journey. Similar experiences in other cultures include out-of-the-body experiences, “astral projection,” and near death or clinical death experiences. Indeed, the author of the book of Revelation explicitly admits that he took such journeys to the realm of God and other places from which he could see the cosmos from God’s vantage point (Rev 4:1–2; 21:10)¹⁴. Paul describes his experience quite explicitly. He recalls that his sky journey (a trance experience) took place “fourteen years ago” from the time he was writing Second Corinthians (about 57 A.D., hence 43 A.D.). With his feet planted firmly on the ground he was caught up “to the third heaven,”

¹⁴ See: B. J. Malina, J. J. Pilch, *Social Science Commentary on Revelation*, Minneapolis 2000.

to Paradise (2 Cor 12:2) His statement about not knowing whether he was “in the body or out of the body,” is typical of altered states of consciousness experiences. During the experience, one’s level of awareness fluctuates, and one might even momentarily return to “normal” consciousness. This explains

Paul’s puzzlement. He was certain of the experience but not certain of the level of awareness at which it took place.

6. In the encounter with spirits, the holy man can interact with them without fear of them possessing him.

Paul makes no mention of this in his letters, yet his references to working mighty deeds (2 Cor 12:12; see also Rom 15:19) suggests that he feared no spirits, good or bad, when he encountered them.

7. Memory. The holy man remembers at least some aspects of his trance experiences.

In his letters to the Corinthians (notably 2 Cor 12), Paul has clear and vivid recollections of his sky journey and his experiences there which are ineffable. This, too, is typical of trance experiences. The visionary works hard and long at expressing and interpreting the experiences.

8. Healing is a major focus of a holy man’s activity.

In this regard, too, while Acts specifies some of Paul’s healing activities, Paul himself in his letters does not refer to any such activities, except for the general report of performing signs and wonders, and mighty deeds (2 Cor 12:12; see also Rom 15:19), biblical terms that include healing activity.

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The event traditionally described as “the conversion of Paul” is more appropriately identified as “the call of Paul” by God to a certain task. Paul did not convert from Judaism to Christianity since the latter did not yet exist. Rather, Paul learned that the God of Israel had done something new in Jesus of Nazareth, and God called Paul to communicate that to fellow Israelites especially those living in non-Israelites lands. Luke’s reports seem to place Paul on par with eyewitness companions of Jesus, that is, the Apostles. Paul seems to understand and locate himself in the context of Israelite prophets, holy men, selected by God for specific tasks. Paul perfectly fits the model of a holy man as reported by social scientists from their cross cultural researches.

POWOŁANIE ŚW. PAWŁA DO BYCIA APOSTOŁEM

Streszczenie

Antropologiczno-kulturowa analiza (zob. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* II. D. 2) powołania św. Pawła przez Boga do specjalnej posługi, zgodnie z tym, co relacjonuje Łukasz w *Dziejach apostoelskich* i Paweł w jego autentycznych listach, pozwala na nie spojrzeć w nowym świetle. Zarówno Łukasz, jak i Paweł, zgadzają się, że to doświadczenie miało miejsce w odmiennym stanie świadomości, znanym współczesnym naukom neurologicznym i opisywanym przez antropologię psychologiczną. Ta druga dyscyplina widziałaby Pawła jako człowieka świętego, dla którego tego typu doświadczenia są nierozzerwalnie związane z jego statusem. Według relacji Łukasza, Paweł jest na równi z naocznymi świadkami Jezusa, czyli z Apostołami. Paweł rozumie i umieszcza siebie pośród proroków Izraela, świętych mężów, wybranych przez Boga do szczególnych zadań.