

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Early Years (Part 3)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

If Paul before his conversion was not totally ignorant of Jesus, on the other hand his knowledge only increased his opposition to Jesus and Jesus' followers. It is not true that before the conversion Paul was gradually coming nearer to Christianity. Against any such supposition stands the explicit testimony of the Epistles.

Despite that testimony, various attempts have been made to trace a psychological development in Paul which could have led to the conversion. Paul was converted through a vision of the risen Christ. According to the supernaturalistic view that vision was a "vision," not in any specialized meaning of the word, but in its original etymological meaning; Paul actually "saw" the risen Lord. According to the modern naturalistic view, which rejects any direct creative interposition of God in the course of nature, different in kind from His works of providence, the vision was produced by the internal condition of the subject, accompanied perhaps by favorable conditions without—the heat of the sun or a thunderstorm or the like. But was the condition of the subject, in the case of Paul, really favorable to a vision of the risen Christ? If the vision of Christ was an hallucination, as it is held to be by modern naturalistic historians, how may the genesis of this pathological experience be explained?

In the first place, a certain basis for the experience is sought in the physical organism of the subject. According to the Epistles, it is said, the apostle was subject to a recurrent malady; this malady is spoken of in 2 Cor. xii. 1-8 in connection with visions and revelations. In Gal. iv. 14, where it is said that the Galatians did not "spit out" when the apostle was with them, an allusion is sometimes discovered to the ancient custom of spitting to avoid contagion. A combination of this passage with the one in 2 Corinthians is thought to establish a diagnosis of epilepsy, the effort being made to show that "spitting out" was particularly prevalent in the case of that disease. The visions then become an additional symptom of the epileptic seizures.¹

But the diagnosis rests upon totally insufficient data. The visions are not regarded in 2 Corinthians as part of the buffetings of the angel of Satan; on the contrary, the two things are sharply separated in Paul's mind; he rejoices in the visions, but prays the Lord that the buffetings may cease. It is not even said that

¹ See Krenkel, *Beiträge zur Aufhellung der Geschichte und der Briefe des Apostels Paulus*, 1890, pp. 47-125.

the visions and the buffetings came close together; there is no real basis for the view that the buffetings consisted in nervous exhaustion following the visions. In Gal. iv. 14, the "spitting out" is probably to be taken figuratively, and the object is "your temptation in my flesh." The meaning then is simply, "You did not reject me or spue me out"; and there is no allusion to the custom of "spitting out" for the purpose of avoiding contagion. It is unnecessary, therefore, to examine the elaborate argument of Krenkel by which he sought to show that epilepsy was particularly the disease against which spitting was practised as a prophylactic measure.

There is therefore absolutely no evidence to show that Paul was an epileptic, unless the very fact of his having visions be thought to furnish such evidence. But such a use of the visions prejudices the great question at issue, which concerns the objective validity of Paul's religious convictions. Further-more, the fact should always be borne in mind that Paul distinguished the visions very sharply from the experience which he had near Damascus, when he saw the Lord. The visions are spoken of in 2 Corinthians apparently with reluctance, as something which concerned the apostle alone; the Damascus experience was part of the evidence for the resurrection of Christ, and had a fundamental place in the apostle's missionary preaching. All efforts to break down this distinction have failed. The apostle regarded the Damascus experience as unique not a mystery like the experiences which are mentioned in 2 Corinthians, but a plain, palpable fact capable of being understood by all.

But if the Damascus experience is to be regarded as an hallucination, it is not sufficient to exhibit a basis for it in the physical weakness of the apostle. Even if Paul was constitutionally predisposed to hallucinations, the experience of this particular hallucination must be shown to be possible. The challenge has often been accepted by modern historians. It is maintained that the elements of Paul's new conviction must have been forming gradually in his mind; the Damascus experience, it is said, merely brought to light what was really already present. In this way, the enormous disparity between effect and cause is thought to be removed; the untold benefits of Paulin-ism are no longer to be regarded as due to the fortunate chance of an hallucination, induced by the weakness of the apostle and the heat of the desert sun, but rather to a spiritual development which the hallucination merely revealed. Thus the modern view of Paul's conversion, it is thought, may face bravely the scorn of Beyschlag, who exclaimed, when speaking of the naturalistic explanation of Paul's vision, "Oh blessed drop of blood... which by pressing at the right moment upon the brain of Paul, produced such a moral wonder."² The drop of blood, it is said, or whatever may have been the physical basis of the Damascus experience, did not produce the wonders of the Pauline gospel; it merely brought into the sphere of consciousness a psychological process which had really been going on before. The existence of such a psychological process, by which the apostle was coming

² Beyschlag, "Die Bekehrung des Apostels Paulus," in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, xxxvii, 1864, p. 241.

nearer to Christ, is sometimes thought to receive documentary support in one verse of the New Testament. In Acts xxvi. 14, the risen Christ is represented as saying to Paul, "It is hard for thee to kick against the goads." According to this verse, it is said, Paul had been resisting a better conviction, gradually forming in his mind, that the disciples might be right about Jesus and he might be wrong; that, it is said, was the goad which was really driving him. He had indeed been resisting vigorously; he had been stifling his doubts by more and more feverish activity in persecution. But the resistance had not really brought him peace; the goad was really there. And at last, near Damascus, the resistance was overcome; the subconscious conviction which had brought tumult into his soul was at last allowed to come to the surface and rule his conscious life.

At this point, the historian is in grave danger of becoming untrue to his own critical principles. Attention to the Book of Acts, it has been maintained, is not to be allowed to color the interpretation of the Pauline Epistles, which are the primary sources of information. But here the procedure is reversed. In the interests of a verse in Acts, standing, more-over, in a context which on naturalistic principles cannot be regarded as historical, the clear testimony of the Epistles is neglected. For Paul was certainly not conscious of any goad which before his conversion was forcing him into the new faith; he knows nothing of doubts which assailed him during the period of his activity in persecution. On the contrary, the very point of the passage in Galatians, where he alludes to his persecuting activity, is the suddenness of his conversion. Far from gradually coming nearer to Christ he was in the very midst of his zeal for the Law when Christ called him. purpose of the passage is to show that his gospel came to him without human intermediation. Before the conversion, he says, there was of course no human intermediation, since he was an active persecutor. He could not have spoken in this way if before the conversion he had already become half convinced that those whom he was persecuting were right. Moreover, throughout the Epistles there appears in the apostle not the slightest consciousness of his having acted against better convictions when he persecuted the Church. In 1 Tim. i. 13 he distinctly says that he carried on the persecution in ignorance; and even if Timothy be regarded as post-Pauline, the silence of the other epistles at least points in the same direction. Paul was deeply penitent for having persecuted the Church of God, but apparently he did not lay to his charge the black sin of having carried on the persecution in the face of better convictions. When he laid the Church waste he thought he was doing God service. In the very midst of his mad persecuting activity, he says, apart from any teaching from men—apart, we may certainly infer, from any favorable impressions formed in his mind—the Lord appeared to him and gave him his gospel. Paul stakes everything upon the evidential value of the appearance, which was able suddenly to overcome an altogether hostile attitude. Such is the self - testimony of the apostle. It rests as a serious weight upon all attempts at making the conversion the result of a psychological process.

Certainly the passage in Acts will not help to bear the weight. When the risen Christ says to Paul, "It is hard for thee to kick against the goads," He need not mean at all that the presence of the goad had been known to Paul before that hour. The meaning may be simply that the will of Christ is resistless; all opposition is in vain, the appointed hour of Christ has arrived. Conscious opposition on the part of Paul to a better conviction is certainly not at all implied. No doubt Paul was really miserable when he was a persecutor; all activity contrary to the plan of Christ brings misery. But that he had the slightest inkling of the source of his misery or even of the fact of it need not be supposed. It is even possible that the "hardness" of resistance to the goad is to be found only in the very moment of the conversion. "All resistance," says the risen Christ, "all hesitation, is as hopeless as for the ox to kick against the goad; instant obedience alone is in place."

The weight of the apostle's own testimony is therefore in no sense removed by Acts xxvi. 14. That testimony is unequivocally opposed to all attempts at exhibiting a psychological process culminating in the conversion. These attempts, however, because of the importance which has been attributed to them, must now be examined. In general, they are becoming less and less elaborate; contemporary scholars are usually content to dismiss the psychological problem of the conversion with a few general observations about the secret of personality, or, at the most, a brief word about the possible condition of the apostle's mind. Since the direct interposition of the risen Christ is rejected, it is held that there must have been some psychological preparation for the Damascus experience, but what that preparation remained hidden, it is said, in the secret places of the soul, which no psychological analysis can ever fully reveal. If, however, the problem is not thus to be dismissed as insoluble, no unanimity has been achieved among those who attempt a solution. Two principal lines of solution of the problem may perhaps be distinguished—that which begins with the objective evidence as it presented itself to the persecutor, and that which starts with the seventh chapter of Romans and the persecutor's own sense of need. The former line was followed by Holsten, whose monographs still constitute the most elaborate exposition of the psychological process supposed to lie back of the conversion.³ According to Holsten, the process centered in the consideration of the Cross of Christ. That consideration of course resulted at first in an attitude of hostility on the part of Paul. The Cross was a shameful thing; the proclamation of a crucified Messiah appeared, therefore, to the devout Pharisee as an outrageous blasphemy. But the disciples represented the Cross as in accordance with the will of God, and supported their contention by the evidence for the resurrection; the resurrection was made to overcome the offense of the Cross. But against the evidence for the resurrection, Holsten believes, Paul was helpless, the possibility of resurrection being fully recognized in his Pharisaic

³ Holsten, *Zum Evangelium des Paulus und des Petrus*, 1868. Against Holsten, see Beyschlag, "Die Bekehrung des Apostels Paulus, mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Erklärungsversuche von Baur und Holsten," in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, xxxvii, 1864, pp. 197-264; "Die Visionshypothese in ihrer neuesten Begründung. Eine Duplik gegen D. Holsten," *ibid.*, xliii, 1870, pp. 7-50, 189-263.

training What then if the resurrection really vindicated the claims of Jesus to be the Messiah? Paul was by no means convinced, Holsten believes, that such was the case. But the possibility was necessarily in his mind, if only for the purposes of refutation. At this point Paul began to advance, according to Holsten, beyond the earlier disciples. On the assumption that the resurrection really did vindicate the claims of Jesus, the Cross would have to be explained. But an explanation lay ready to hand, and Paul applied this explanation with a thoroughness which the earlier disciples had not attained. The earlier disciples removed the offense of the Cross by representing the Cross as part of the plan of God for the Messiah; Paul exhibited the meaning of that plan much more clearly than they. He exhibited the meaning of the Cross by applying to it the category of vicarious suffering, which could be found, for example, in Isaiah liii. At this point the pre-Christian development of Paul was over. The Pauline "gnosis of the Cross" was already formed. Of course, before the conversion it was to Paul entirely a matter of supposition. On the supposition, still regarded as false, had really taken place, the Cross, far from being an offense, would become a glorious fact. All the essential elements of Paul's gospel of the Cross were thus present in Paul's mind before the conversion; the validity of them had been posited by him for the purposes of argument. The only thing that was lacking to make Paul a disciple of Jesus was conviction of the fact of the resurrection. That conviction was supplied by the Damascus experience. The unstable equilibrium then was over; the elements of the Pauline gospel, which were all present before, fell at once into their proper places. The other way of explaining the conversion starts from the seventh chapter of Romans and the dissatisfaction which Paul is thought to have experienced under the Law. Paul, it is said, was a Pharisee; he made every effort to keep the Law of God. But he was too earnest to be satisfied with a merely external obedience; and real obedience he had not attained. He was therefore tormented by a sense of sin. That sense of sin no doubt led him into a more and more feverish effort to keep the letter of the Law and particularly to show his zeal by persecuting the disciples of Jesus. But all his efforts were vain; his obedience remained insufficient; the curse of the Law still rested upon him. What if the vain effort could be abandoned? What if the disciples of Jesus were right? Of course, he believed, they were not right, but what if they were? What if the Messiah had really died for the sins of believers, in accordance with Isaiah liii? What if salvation were attainable not by merit but by divine grace? These questions, it is supposed, were in the mind of Paul. He answered them still in the negative, but his misery kept them ever before his mind. The Law was thus a schoolmaster to bring him to Christ. He was ready for the vision. In both of these lines of explanation importance is often attributed to the impression produced upon Paul's mind by the character of the disciples. Whence did they derive their bravery and their joy in the midst of persecution? Whence came the fervor of their love, whence the firmness of their faith? The persecutor, it is said, was impressed against his will.

The fundamental objection to all these theories of psychological development is that they describe only what might have been or what ought to have been, and

not what actually was. No doubt Paul ought to have been coming nearer to Christianity; but as a matter of fact he was rather getting further away, and he records the fact in no uncertain terms in his Epistles. There are objections, moreover, to the various theories of development in detail; and the advocates of one theory are often the severest critics of another.

With regard to Holsten's exposition of the "gnosis of the Cross," for example, there is not the slightest evidence that the pre-Christian Jews interpreted Isaiah lii of the vicarious sufferings of the Messiah, or had any notion of the Messiah's vicarious death.⁴ It is not true, moreover, as Beyschlag pointed out against Holsten, that Paul was helpless in the face of the evidence for the resurrection.⁵ According to Paul's Pharisaic training, the resurrection would come only at the end of the age; a resurrection like the resurrection of Jesus, therefore, was by no means a matter of course, and could be established only by positive evidence of the most direct and unequivocal kind.

With regard to the sense of sin as the goad which forced Paul to accept the Saviour, there is no evidence that before his conversion Paul was under real conviction of sin. It is very doubtful whether Rom. vii. 7-25, with its account of the struggle between the flesh and the higher nature of man, refers to the unregenerate rather than to the regenerate life; and even if the former view is correct, it is doubtful whether the description is taken from the apostle's own experience. At any rate, the struggle, even if it be a struggle in the unregenerate man, is described from the point of view of the re-generate; it is not implied, therefore, that before the entrance of the Spirit of God a man is fully conscious of his own helplessness and of the desperateness of the struggle. The passage, therefore, does not afford any certain information about the pre-Christian life of Paul. Undoubtedly before the conversion the conscience of Paul was aroused; he was conscientious in his devotion to the Law. Probably he was conscious of his failings. But that such consciousness of failure amounted to anything like that genuine conviction of sin which leads a man to accept the Saviour remains very doubtful. Recognized failure to keep the Law perfectly led in the case of Paul merely to greater zeal for the Law, a zeal which was manifested especially in the persecution of a blasphemous sect whose teaching was subversive of the authority of Moses.

Finally, it is highly improbable that Paul was favorably impressed by the bravery of those whom he was persecuting. It may seem strange at first sight that the same man who wrote the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians should have haled helpless men and women to prison without a qualm or listened without pity to the dying words of Stephen, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." But it is very dangerous to argue back from the Christian life of Paul to the life of Paul the

⁴ See Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, 4te Aufl., ii, 1907, pp. 648-651 (English Translation, *A History of the Jewish People*, Division II, vol. ii, 1885, pp. 184-187).

⁵ Beyschlag, "Die Visionshypothese in ihrer neuesten Begründung," in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, xliii, 1870, pp. 19-21.

Pharisee. Paul himself was conscious of a complete moral transformation as having taken place in him when he saw the Lord near Damascus. What was impossible for him after that transformation may well have been possible before. Moreover, if, despite such considerations, we could argue back from Paul the disciple of Jesus to Paul the Pharisee, there is one characteristic of the apostle which would never have permitted him to persecute those by whom he was favorably im-pressed-namely, his complete sincerity. The picture of Saul the doubter, torn by conflicting emotions, impressed by the calmness and bravery and magnanimity of those whom he was persecuting, yet stifling such impressions by persecuting zeal, is very romantic, but very un-Pauline.

But in attributing the conversion of Paul altogether to the experience on the road to Damascus, are we not heaping up into one moment what must of very necessity in conscious life be the work of years? Is it conceivable that ideas should have been implanted in the mind of a person not by processes of acquisition but mechanically as though by a hypodermic syringe? Would not such an experience, even if it were possible, be altogether destructive of personality? The objection serves to correct possible misunderstandings. The view of the conversion which has just been set forth does not mean that when Paul drew near to Damascus on that memorable day he was ignorant of the facts about Jesus. If he had never heard of Jesus, or if having heard of Him he knew absolutely nothing about Him, then perhaps the conversion would have been not only supernatural but inconceivable. But it is not the traditional view of the conversion which is guilty of such exaggerations. They are the product rather of that separation of Paul from the historical Jesus which appears for example in Wrede and in Bousset. According to any reasonable view of Paul's pre-Christian experience, Paul was well acquainted, before the conversion, with many of the facts about Jesus' life and death; what he received on the road to Damascus was a new interpretation of the facts and a new attitude toward them. He had known the facts before, but they had filled him with hatred; now his hatred was changed into love.

Even after exaggerations have been removed, however, the change wrought by the Damascus experience remains revolutionary enough. Is that change conceivable? Could hatred have been changed into love merely by an experience which convinced Paul of the fact of the resurrection? The answer to this question depends altogether upon the nature of the Damascus experience. If that experience was merely an hallucination, the question must be answered in the negative; an hallucination could never have produced the profound changes in the personal life of Paul which have just been contemplated; and the historian would be obliged to fall back, despite the unequivocal testimony of the Epistles, upon some theory of psychological development of which the hallucination would only be the climax. But even those who maintain the supernaturalistic view of the conversion have too often failed to do justice to the content of the experience. One fundamental feature of the experience has too often been forgotten-the appearance on the road to Damascus was the appearance of a person.

Sometimes the event has been regarded merely as a supernatural interposition of God intended to produce belief in the fact of the resurrection, as merely a sign. Undoubtedly it was a sign. But it was far more; it was contact between persons. But contact between persons, even under ordinary conditions, is exceedingly mysterious; merely a look or the tone of the voice sometimes produces astonishing results. Who has not experienced the transition from mere hearsay knowledge of a person to actual contact? One meeting is often sufficient to revolutionize the entire impression; indifference or hostility gives place at once to enthusiastic devotion. Those who speak of the transformation wrought in Paul by the appearance of Jesus as magical or mechanical or inconceivable have never reflected upon the mysteries of personal intercourse.

Only, it must have been a real person whom Paul met on the road to Damascus—not a vision, not a mere sign. If it was merely a vision or a sign, all the objections remain in force. But if it was really Jesus, the sight of His face and the words of love which He uttered may have been amply sufficient, provided the heart of Paul was renewed by the power of God's Spirit, to transform hatred into love. To call such an experience magic is to blaspheme all that is highest in human life. God was using no unworthy instrument when, by the personal presence of the Saviour, He transformed the life of Paul.

There is, therefore, no moral or psychological objection in the way of a simple acceptance of Paul's testimony about the conversion. And that testimony is unequivocal. Paul was not converted by any teaching which he received from men; he was not converted as Christians are usually converted, by the preaching of the truth or by that revelation of Christ which is contained in the lives of His followers. Jesus Himself in the case of Paul did in visible presence what He ordinarily does by the means which He has appointed. Upon this immediateness of the conversion, Paul is willing to stake the whole of his life; upon it he bases his apostolic authority.

John Gresham Machen (1881-1937) was an American Presbyterian New Testament scholar, who led a revolt against modernist theology at Princeton, and founded Westminster Theological Seminary as well as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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