

6.3 Paul's Experience on the Road to Damascus

Paul/Saul's experience on the road to Damascus which changed his perception of the Christ-movement radically is narrated three times in Acts, in narrative in 9.1-22 and in two speeches of Paul 22.1-12; 26.1-23. The three accounts show considerable variations between them.

The location of the story of Saul/Paul's call/transformation in the sequence of events in the Acts seems slightly strange. Since Saul/Paul is known through his letters as apostle to the gentiles it is interesting that he is introduced here, after the first Christ-followers have been baptized in Samaria (8.4-13); it could be expected that the spreading of the gospel to the gentiles would follow. But after the narrative of another encounter of Philip which led to the baptism of the Ethiopian (8.26-40) it is the narrative of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus which follows, and Paul is not introduced as the one who initiated the mission to the gentiles. In Damascus he is said to have only been preaching in the synagogue and to Jews (9.20-22). Thus Luke clearly depicts Peter to be the one who initiated the mission to the gentiles (Acts 10 see unit 7). Paul only comes on the scene later and as a 'junior' partner of Barnabas working together with him in Antiochia (11.25-26).

Paul had already been briefly introduced at the end of the Stephen scene in 7.58 in a passive role and in an active role involved in actions against the Christ-followers in the summary passage 8.3. This thread is now being picked up in 9.1 and from these earlier mentions the audience knows that Paul/Saul is a person who is dangerous for the movement. Thus in 9.1-2 he is found embarking on a mission against Christ-followers in Damascus. It seems irrelevant to the narrative to know how the Christ-movement spread there (unlike the spreading of the movement to Antiochia which is explained in 11.19-20). The narrative however does not dwell on the persecution activity of Paul/Saul but on the encounter with the risen Christ (9.3-6). The format of this encounter resembles that of visions of or encounters with God in the Hebrew Scriptures: a double vocative is found e.g. in Isa 6.8, Ex 3.4, 1.Sam 4.10. But rather than the voice of God, Saul hears the voice of Jesus. The main part of the experience is the hearing of the voice rather than seeing anything particular apart from light surrounding Saul/Paul. Jesus' response to Paul in 9.5b indicate that Paul's persecution of disciples is seen as identical with the persecution of Jesus himself which reminds us of Lk 10.16 where Jesus emphasised 'whoever rejects you, rejects me'.

Paul/Saul is not told much in this encounter, he is asked why he is persecuting the followers of Christ – and then he is told to get up and to go to the city. The change which this experience initiated in Saul/Paul is not explained but only indicated by the word 'but' at the beginning of 9.8 and the fact that he cannot see anything despite opening his eyes. In contrast to his active role in the persecution of the Christ-followers he is now very passive – what happens from now on in this episode happens to Saul/Paul and he is very much in a passive role. The seeing of the light and the hearing of the voice affects him, different from his companions very much (9.7-9). Before the narrative continues, a new character is introduced in 9.10 - Ananias, a disciple who represents the Christ-following community of Damascus. Ananias is a key figure here which is emphasized by his visionary experience which consists of a long dialogue with God and a commissioning of Ananias to a special role in Saul's/Paul's experience which leads him to join the Christ-movement. Ananias's commissioning is a call narrative, with all the elements of other call narratives: a divine call (9.10), a special mandate (9.12), an initial objection by the called (9.13-14), and the overruling of the objection followed by the sending (9.15-16). Within the vision Ananias is told that someone else will also have a vision which will guide them both to an accepting positive encounter. The objection of Ananias provides the narrator with the

opportunity to clarify that this person Ananias is about the meet is not only a new member but one who is called to fulfil a specific role within the movement. The special commissioning of Paul is here not heard by Paul directly but by Ananias who acts as a mediator between Saul/Paul and the community but also between Saul/Paul and God. The person who is most active in Saul's/Paul's transformation is Ananias as God's mediator, not Saul/Paul who is entirely passive. This seems to indicate an emphasis put on the role of the community in the transformation experience of new Christ-followers, the guidance and socialization into the values and the way of life in Christ.

A particular detail which has repeatedly been found previously in Luke-Acts, and which here again plays a prominent role (Acts 9.3,9,17-8) is the symbolic dimension of light. It was found in Lk 1.78-79, 2.30, 4.18, 24.16,31 and resonates with passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, e.g. Isa 6.9-19, 40.3-5, but also in Philo, Joseph and Aseneth and Odes of Solomon. In all these traditions seeing and the light have something to do with theological illumination and understanding. After the announcement in the two visions, that of Paul and of Ananias, verses 9.17-19a now provide a direct account of what had been announced before: Saul/Paul is in Damascus, Ananias finds him, and through this encounter Paul's vision is restored. The symbolic dimension of the restoration of Paul's sight is emphasized by the baptism of Paul which follows immediately afterwards. And subsequent to his baptism we find Paul immediately fulfilling his new role of preaching the gospel to Jews in Damascus. The focus of the narrative is not primarily on the restoration of sight as such but rather on the fact that upon receiving an aural message he perceives everything in a new light.

The narrative about Paul comes to a conclusion in a scene which exemplifies that the prophecy of suffering of 9. 16 is fulfilled: Saul gets into trouble and has to leave the city, a topic which subsequently often reoccurs in Acts. The motivation for Saul's persecution here is unclear. But it is here that Luke for the first time uses the term 'Jews' for opponents of the gospel. Paul nevertheless adamantly continues to identify himself as a Jew e.g. Acts 22. 3 (this issue will be dealt with in unit 7).

Essential Readings

- ** Gaventa, Beverly, *Acts*, pp. 146-155
- ** 6.3 Hamm Dennis, 'Paul's Blindness and Its Healing: Clues to Symbolic Intent (Acts 9, 22 and 26)', in *Bib* 71, 1990, pp. 63-72.
- ** 6.4 Marguerat, Daniel, 'Saul's Conversion (Acts 9,22,26) and the Multiplication of Narrative in Acts' in Tuckett C.M. ed., *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1995, pp. 127-155.

Further Readings

Fitzmyer Joseph, *The Acts of the Apostles*, New York: Doubleday 1998, pp.418-442.

Tannehill, Robert C., *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. Vol 2 The Acts of the Apostles*. Minneapolis: Fortress 1990, pp. 113-124.