Paul's Experience:

Sighting or Theophany?

Fergus Kerr O.P.

What did Paul have to say about the resurrection, Geoffrey Turner asks (*New Blackfriars*, April 1977), as he goes on to say that I have suggested that "Paul had a simple spiritual experience". Well, if that is the impression that I have left, I must try to make myself a little clearer.

Geoffrey Turner appeals to I Cor 15 and interprets that reference to the appearance of the risen Christ to Paul in terms of Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles of the Damascus road experience. Is it so obvious that this move is legitimate? Admittedly it has frequently been made, at least since the middle of the second century when readers of the New Testament were first in a position to turn from one text to another and begin the process of harmonising the different accounts which it is one of the major effects of modern New Testament studies to bring into question. We need to remind ourselves, however, that Luke shows no knowledge of any of Paul's letters. In fact the picture of Paul that Luke gives in Acts is remarkably unlike the picture that emerges from Paul's own letters. The account that one man gives of another would of course differ a good deal from a self portrait, but the differences between Paul's own theology and Luke's account of it in Acts are so obvious and numerous that we must reckon with the possibility, and even the likelihood, that Luke did not have much access to Pauline material. Methodologically, if we are to be cautious, we must leave open the possibility that the Lukan accounts of the Damascus road experience were not derived from Paul himself but were Luke's reconstruction of what must have happened. The only prudent course for us, then, is to start by considering the Damascus road experience on the basis of nothing more than Paul's references and allusions to it in his own letters.

Without going into detail here, I would argue that four of Paul's letters allude to his Damascus road experience. In the letter to the Galatians, written about 55 AD and thus about ten or twelve years after the event, if we follow the consensus on dating, we read as follows:

> For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through ***a revelation of Jesus Christ.*** For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many

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> of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased ***to reveal his Son in me,*** in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, etc (Gal 1: 11-16).

It is much disputed if this is an allusion to the Damascus road experience. If it is (as I would think), then it is possible for Paul to think of it as a "revelation of Jesus Christ", an *apokalupsis,* and to spell it out a little further as God's choosing "to reveal his Son in me", *apokalupsai ton huion autou en emoi.* As far as the grammar goes, it seems undecidable whether that *en emoi* means "within me", in the sense of a simple spiritual experience, or "to me", in the sense of some public event that others might have observed. Was this an objective or a purely subjective "revelation", or would such categories even be relevant? The main point, however, is that Paul was clearly familiar with Christian claims about Jesus. The revelation was not of any fresh factual information about the Church of God. It was surely rather that he was brought to realise the truth of the Christian claims, in such a way that, with such texts as Isaiah 49: 1-6 and Jeremiah 1: 5 at the back of his mind, he could envisage the experience as a call to be in his own way a "prophet to the nations". What had hitherto been hidden from him—that Jesus was messiah and Son of God—was now disclosed as true in an experience, whether subjective or objective or both, which he regarded it as appropriate to refer to as an "apocalypse of Jesus Christ".

The second allusion to Paul's experience of the risen Christ comes, in my opinion, in his letter to the Philippians, although this is much open to dispute as a glance at any commentary will show. The passage runs as follows:

> I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of ***knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*** For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because ***Christ Jesus has made me his own.*** (Phil 3: 8-12)

To preserve the pasive mood of the verb that closing phrase would be better translated: "because I have been overtaken and apprehended, seized and won, by Christ Jesus". Again this can never be proved beyond argument, but does it not seem likely that Paul's being made Christ's own dated historically from his Damascus road experience? In that case it could be alluded to as a kind of *arrest.* What is, however, more striking, and certainly less disputable, in this text, is Paul's reference to his passage from a righteous-

ness based on the Jewish Law to a righteousness which is through faith in Christ. For Paul, a Pharisee through and through, his conversion meant that the "knowledge of the Lord", *da'ath Yahweh,* which he once found in *Torah,* could henceforward be found only in "Christ Jesus my Lord". His conversion was a movement from knowing the Lord in the Law to knowing the Lord as Christ Jesus. He came to know Christ, it would seem, inseparably from coming to know the power of his resurrection and from coming to share his sufferings. His conversion from knowledge of the Lord in *Torah* to knowledge of the Lord in Christ Jesus was the "surpassing worth" which was also his being "possessed" by Christ Jesus. The Damascus road experience could thus be referred to in terms of Paul's being "taken over" by Christ Jesus in the context of "knowledge of the Lord".

The third allusion, fairly generally admitted by commentators, comes in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians where we read:

> For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has ***shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.***
>
> (II Cor 4: 5-6).

We need to put brackets round the name "Jesus" in the closing phrase because there is a strong case for saying that it is not in the original text. Most commentators, from Plummer to Barrett and Bultmann (in his recently published commentary on II Cor), recognize an allusion here to the Damascus road experience. The language is extremely rich. Once again reference is made to "knowledge of God", but this time it is linked to the important theme of *glory* and to the associated theme of *light*. It is "in our hearts" that God has caused the light to shine—the light which lights up the knowledge of the glory (presence) of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That might seem to point unarguably to some "inner experience", but in fact as a brief perusal of references in the Bible to the heart soon shows, no such conclusion need be drawn. On the contrary, much of what goes on "in the heart" plainly involves public and observable experience and behaviour.

The significant points to be noted so far, in these three texts, include the allusions to Paul's conversion, the references to Jesus Christ, and the variation of language for what happened to Paul—"revelation", "being taken over", "illumination"—in the last two cases clearly against the background of Old Testament ideas about knowing God.

We may turn now to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where two allusions to the Damascus road experience are to be noted. The first is the very brief phrase, Paul's protesting expostulation:

> Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not ***seen*** Jesus our Lord?
> (I Cor 9:1)

This is an extremely interesting passage. The context shows that, on the one hand, Paul was confronted in the congregation at Corinth with disparate factions that threatened its unity, while on the other hand he was concerned with the right of missionaries like himself to be financially supported by the churches: as early as 50 AD there were apparently questions of church unity and problems about paying the clergy! The main point for our present purpose is, however, simply that Paul here bases his standing as an apostle on the fact that he has seen Jesus our Lord. He claims to have seen the Lord—Old Testament language, of course—and what he has seen is that the Lord, for us, is Jesus. There is no doubt that whatever Paul saw he was sure it was Jesus as Lord. What is not at all clear, on the other hand, is whether, for Paul, Jesus was seen *in the ordinary sense* (as Geoffrey Turner argues).

We cannot simply assume that the word *heoraka* in I Cor 9:1 necessarily implies, for Paul, any reference to the kind of sightings of the risen Christ which Matthew, Luke-Acts and John all variously describe. There is nothing to stop any one from harmonising the texts. Everyone is free to think that when Paul speaks of seeing the risen Christ he must mean some kind of seeing in the ordinary sense such as three of the evangelists describe, or at any rate something such as the Damascus road experience as Luke describes it in the Acts of the Apostles. It seems to me, however, that one is not obliged to think along those lines. We are just as free to let the texts speak for themselves and thus to take them in their difference from one another. I shall not argue now that Paul's understanding of what it was to see the risen Jesus had little to do with the way in which three of the evangelists present the resurrection appearances. It will suffice for the moment if I can outline the case for arguing that Paul's own allusions to the Damascus road experience conflict as much as they agree with Luke's descriptions of it in Acts. In other words, the evidence is such that one is free to refuse to overlook or minimise the differences. That means, in turn, that one need not read Paul's references to his seeing the risen Lord Jesus entirely through the grid of Luke's version.

But first we must look again at the crucial text in which Paul presents his Damascus road experience on the same level as the several experiences of the Apostles. The text reads as follows:

> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he ***appeared*** to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he ***appeared*** also to me. (I Cor 15: 3-8)

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We can only be grateful that there were Christians in Corinth in the early fifties who had misunderstood the doctrine of the resurrection so radically that Paul was obliged to write this letter in part to correct them. But for that stimulus we might never have inherited this precious fragment. It is worth reflecting, in passing, that deep differences over the resurrection clearly existed in the church at the earliest period—and that for all the vigour of his opposition to them Paul never seems to have wanted to unchurch his misguided flock over this issue. As ever, the excerpt has many interesting ramifications. At this early period, for example, there was already a statement which Paul could regard as a "tradition". The tradition that he recites already reflects a highly developed theology. In the decade or so that may have elapsed between the first Easter and Paul's reception of this fragment of tradition there had already been sufficient reflection on the scriptures ("according to the scriptures") to show that Christ had died "for our sins", and that he had been raised "on the third day". In other words, the essential soteriology of the Passion was already securely established, and the significance of the Resurrection as the inauguration of the New Age had been perceived. As Martin Hengel shows in his splendid little book, there was more development in Christology in the first twenty years of the Church's existence than in the following seven centuries of patristic argument and doctrinal argument and doctrinal formulation. The essential achievement Paul himself apparently came on the scene late enough to inherit. So much for the idea that Paul invented Christianity. So great, and so rapid, was the theological achievement in the first decade of the Church's existence that one is almost inclined to think that Jesus himself—before Easter—may actually have had a hand in it. Whatever objections there may be from the orthodox to the recent Christologies of Hans Kung and Edward Schillebeeckx it must at least be admitted that they both attach great importance to the creative teaching of the so-called historical Jesus.

But back to the text. The four-part structure of the little "creed" has often been noticed: died/buried/raised/appeared. That he died is confirmed by the fact that he was buried: the forgiveness of sins which the New Testament regularly makes so essential to the Easter experience depends on his having really died, and burial is the ultimate proof of death. This is nothing so simple as a protest against a docetic Christology; it is a very profound, deeply Jewish theology of atonement and expiation. That he was raised (better: has been raised, for this the one perfect tense among these aorists) is confirmed by the fact that he appeared to Cephas, and others, finally also to Paul himself. There is no serious doubt that Paul is speaking here of his Damascus road experience, and that for Paul at least the "appearances" of the risen Christ to Simon Peter, the Twelve, and so on, were on the same level and of the

same kind as his own experience.

"He appeared to Cephas", *ophthe Kepha*—the phrase that holds the clue to what must surely have been the most fundamental event in the history of the Church: the original appearance of the risen Christ to Simon Peter, the event on the strength of which he gathered the disciples together to proclaim the Resurrection. We might have expected the evangelists to describe this first appearance to Peter, or to give us the tradition if it was recorded. In fact, however, unless one counts John 21: 15-17, there is no description of the appearance to Peter anywhere. Matthew, who makes so much of Simon Peter's role, either knows nothing of this appearance or omits any reference to it. Luke cites a sloganlike acclamation—"The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon" (Luke 24: 34)—which is remarkably similar to Paul's citation from the tradition. The question is whether one can reconstruct the meaning of "appeared", *ophthe*—need this imply seeing (in the ordinary sense)?

A good deal of work has been done on this question recently, culminating in the entry on the word *horao* and its cognates by Michaelis in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (volume 5, 1968). Anybody with a Septuagint version of the Old Testament could make the point in a few minutes. It is not that it can be proved beyond all argument that the meaning of "appeared", *ophthe*, does not involve seeing in the ordinary sense. It is only that this claim is so doubtful that one remains free to think in terms of something other than seeing in the ordinary sense.

The main point is that, in the Septuagint, the word *ophthe*, "appeared", very seldom refers to perception with the eye in any ordinary sense. The commonest sense in the Pentateuch, where the phrase is frequently used, refers to the appearance to some individual of the Angel of the Lord, e.g. *ophthe de auto angelos Kuriou* (Exodus 3: 2), where the burning bush rather than the angel is what Moses actually sees; or it refers to the appearance to somebody of the Lord, e.g. *ophthe Kurios to Abram* (Genesis 12: 7), where Abraham's perception of the Lord seems more like hearing than seeing. It is difficult not to regard these expressions as the model for the language of the credal fragment which Paul cites in I Cor 15. There is no need to claim more than the evidence supports. So far as I can make out, the seeing which was involved in the appearance of the risen Christ to Cephas and to Paul need not have been all that different, in Paul's mind, from the seeing which was involved in the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Moses or the appearance of the Lord to Abraham. That could have been no ordinary seeing—nor for that matter is it likely to have been a simple spiritual experience, in the ordinary pejorative sense.

Furthermore, the grammar of *ophthe* with the dative, as in "he appeared to Cephas", seems to be that the subject is the one

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who acts, i.e. appears, shows himself, makes himself manifest, and there is no special emphasis on the action of the person in the dative. To say that "he appeared to Cephas", in other words, does not mean in the first instance that Cephas saw the risen Christ, with emphasis on seeing, in contrast (say) with hearing. It means that the risen Christ presented hinself to them alive (Acts 1: 3) or, even better, that he was revealed in them by God (Gal 1: 16). For "he appeared" could equally well be translated as "he was made visible", and the passive mood of the verb is often used in the Bible to indicate an action by God. However that may be, the question of how the risen Lord was perceived by Cephas and the others cannot be answered correctly, as Michaelis insists, unless we give full weight to the revelational character of the appearances. The appearances of the Lord Jesus to the Apostles no doubt differ in important respects from the appearances of the Lord to Abraham. The point is simply that, so far as the evidence of I Cor 15 goes, we are in no position to rule out the possibility that these revelatory appearances also had a great deal in common: specifically, that they need not have been—indeed, could not have been—seeing, in the ordinary sense.

This does not mean that the appearances were visions or prophetic dreams or mystical ecstasies. These are all copiously represented in the Bible but, as Geoffrey Turner rightly reminds us, Paul never includes his Damascus road experience when discussing them (e.g. II Cor 12: 2-4).

Paul believed that he had seen the risen Lord Jesus in the same way the other Apostles had, and on the evidence that we have, cautiously interpreted, it cannot be held that Paul regarded these experiences as sightings in the Loch Ness monster sense, or as involving seeing in the ordinary sense. On the contrary, there is every likelihood that Paul aligned the appearances of the risen Jesus with Old Testament theophanies: revelations in which the presence of the Lord was disclosed or the will of the Lord imposed. The background, at least, seems to be Old Testament ideas about knowing God. The evidence surely does not oblige us to think that, for Paul, the Easter appearances were instances of ordinary seeing.

Luke, on the other hand, whose descriptions in Acts of Paul's Damascus road experience have largely overlaid Paul's own allusions for most readers, obviously assumed that Paul had *not* seen the risen Lord in the same way as the other Apostles had. This means that we cannot assume that the three accounts of Paul's conversion which Luke offers are derived from Paul himself. It is in fact difficult not to wonder if Paul would have recognized these accounts as in any way an adequate rendering of his experience.

The three texts are too long to reproduce in extenso here:

Acts 9: 3-19; Acts 21: 6-21; and Acts 26: 12-23. Unlike Geoffrey Turner, I see no reason that compels us to regard any one of the three versions as more acceptable or original than the others. If there is no reason that compels us to think that Luke had much, or any, information from Paul himself, the most likely thing is that he turned to the Old Testament for examples of how to tell the story of an encounter with the Lord. It seems very likely that Luke simply composed his three accounts of Paul's conversion, knowing little more than the fact that it had happened, and using Old Testament models to fill out the picture. It is at any rate very striking if you compare the conversation between the voice of Jesus and the prostrate Paul, which forms the almost word-for-word invariable core of the narrative in all three versions, with Old Testament scenes such as the appearance of the Lord to Abraham (Genesis 22), to Jacob (Genesis 46) and to Moses (Exodus 3). For Luke too, then, the Damascus road experience belonged to the tradition of Old Testament theophanies. This is confirmed by his reference to the "light from heaven", and by Paul's reaction: prostration was the appropriate response to such a disclosure of the divine presence. For Luke, in short, the Damascus road experience was a manifestation to Paul—an "apocalypse"—of the glory of the Lord who has been exalted into heaven, and thus Luke's account bears out Paul's own allusions—except in one, surely crucial particular, which is that according to Luke it is always only the voice of the exalted Jesus which Paul hears. This appearance of the risen Christ was essentially an experience of hearing the word of the Lord—a common enough case in the Old Testament—but the one thing that Paul himself does not say, in his own allusions to his experience, was that it involved *hearing*. Even if all the allusions I have listed are accepted as references to the Damascus road experience, the variation of Paul's language does not include any reference to hearing. Christ was "revealed" to Paul; Paul was in some sense "taken over" by Christ; the light shone in Paul to give him the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; Christ made himself manifest to Paul as he had done also to Cephas and others—but never does Paul himself suggest that he was merely surrounded by light and only heard a voice.

"He was raised and appeared to Cephas"—that is to say, he manifested himself to Cephas, or he was revealed to Cephas by God, within the categories familiar from the Old Testament tradition of divine appearances. Being raised from the dead he was exalted into heaven and could thus become manifest to a human being most appropriately in the same way as the hidden God can reveal himself. What perception on the part of Cephas, or of Paul, could have suggested or compelled or justified this resort to the language of Old Testament theophanies? Did something happen to Cephas that he, or others, subsequently put into words in terms of

such theophanies? Is the reference to Old Testament theophanies itself already a theological reflection and thus in a sense secondary and derivative? Can we drive a wedge between the mere terminology of theophany and the original Easter appearance vouchsafed to Simon Peter? So far as I can make out, we neither can nor need to attempt to do so. The evidence does not provide sufficient basis for such speculation, and surely faith in the Resurrection does not *require* that we get back behind the interpretative categories in which the Easter appearances necessarily occurred? It seems to me that the "he appeared to Cephas" refers, then, to the event that gave rise to faith in the Resurrection, and that it is thus more than just an appropriate idiom or helpful analogy brought in afterwards in order to describe or represent the original event. What happened, that is to say, could not have been explained or communicated by the disciples any better than by their situating it in terms of the Old Testament theophanies. That was surely how it happened to them, according to the evidence of I Cor 15 filled out with Paul's allusions to his own experience. But this is not to reduce what happened to a simple spiritual experience.

Luke's accounts of how Paul was bathed in light from heaven and heard a voice are sufficiently impressive to incline one to think of something much more positive and extraordinary than a "spiritual experience" (in the ordinary sense). Paul's own allusions, however, surely draw us to posit a momentous disclosure, in line with appearances of the Lord to Abraham and Moses, none of which could be plausibly described as "mental acts". There is no more reason to regard Paul's experience of the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ as something that took place entirely in his head and by his own will than there is to treat the great Old Testament theophanies in such fashion. It is surely equally clear, however, that in none of these cases is it necessarily only with seeing (in the ordinary sense) that we have to do. Whatever reserves one might have about the treatment of the Resurrection by St Thomas Aquinas, there can be no doubt that he put his finger on the only valid principle for interpreting the evidence: "the resurrection of Christ was made manifest to men in the way in which divine realities always are disclosed to them" (Summa Theologiae, III, 55, 4). There is surely no reason that compels us to think that the resurrected Lord was ever seen (in the ordinary sense), any more than any other divine reality has ever been. But what Paul saw, for all that, was certainly something more than simply the product of his own imagination. It may not have been very clear to Luke quite what Paul saw, but I would suggest that Paul's own allusions to the matter put it beyond doubt. Paul belongs to the number of those to whom the Lord has revealed himself—as decisively and as unmistakably as ever to Abraham or Moses. The difference is that the Lord, for Paul, revealed his

glory in the face of Jesus Christ—

> and him crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles
> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the
> power of God and the wisdom of God.
>
> (I Cor 1: 23 - 24).

And after all, but for being *called*, who has ever overcome the stumbling block or brooked the folly?

Kingsley Amis: in search of the Simple Life[1]

Bernard McCabe

A delicate shift of tone occurs at that point in the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* when Pope abandons the lethal wit of his "Bill of Attainder" against London society, fashionable, professional, literary, and turns to the other business of the poem, the quiet praise of his father, a simple man who only knew "the language of the Heart". It is a triumph of Horatian satire, a telling move from the essentially comic to a sustaining solemnity. All good comic writers, whatever genre they choose, ultimately want to be able to do something like this, they want their comic perceptions of life's complexities to issue in simple visions of serious truth. Novelists, who depend so much on establishing a reliable "voice", have special problems when their natural mode is comic. When the habitual expression is a grin or a grimace that all-important modulation is far from easy to carry off. An interesting case is the contemporary comic novelist Kingsley Amis. Modern British comedy is notably off-hand and sardonic in tone, and the sought-for shift from hard-bitten cerebration to the large simplicities of the language of the heart is correspondingly hard to make.

But Amis clearly wants to make it. "Serio-comic", he has said of himself,[2] and if in his quirky, variegated oeuvre, social novels, sex novels, mystery novels, love stories, science fiction, plain verse and plain man's criticism the comic is everywhere, the simply serious tries hard to be there too. One novel, *The Anti-Death League*, generally comic in tone like all his other novels, seems a suitable starting-point for taking a general look at Amis, but especially suitable for taking a look at serious Amis:

> "What do you think about death?"
> "Death, sir?"
> "Yes, death. What do you think about it?"
> "I never think about it, sir."
> "Never?"
> "No, sir."
> "Right. Next. What do you think about death?"
> "It's nothing to do with me, sir."

1 This essay appears in a different form in *Old Lines, New Forces*. Ed. Robert K. Morris. (Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press 1977).

2 Kingsley Amis, "My Kind of Comedy," *The Twentieth Century*, July, 1961, p. 46.

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