

# Notes on Biblical Exposition

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## IX. AFTER THE CONVERSION

*"But when He who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me, through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia and again I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to make the acquaintance of Cephas, and I remained with him fifteen days; but another of the apostles I did not see—only I saw James the brother of the Lord" (Gal. 1:15-19, in a literal translation).*

### No Conference with Flesh and Blood

IN the last number of CHRISTIANITY TODAY, we discussed the revelation of God's Son in Paul, which is mentioned at the beginning of this important passage. That revelation, we observed, is to be regarded either (1) as the inner aspect—the effect within Paul's soul—of the outward appearance of Christ at Paul's conversion or (2) a revelation soon after the conversion or (3) the revelation to others which was involved in the wonderful change which Christ wrought by the conversion in Paul's life. In accordance with the first and third of these interpretations, it is distinctly the conversion which is referred to here; and in accordance with the second interpretation it is an event immediately subsequent to the conversion and closely connected with it. We shall not go wrong, therefore—especially since the second interpretation is probably incorrect—if we say that it is the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus that is here treated not only as the turning-point of Paul's life but as the event that gave him the gospel that he was to preach.

"Before the conversion," Paul's argument runs, "I certainly did not become a disciple of the original apostles; for I was then an active persecutor. I was then

certainly not being brought to Christ gradually by any instructions or persuasions of men. My conversion was utterly sudden, and it was produced by an act of God; I received my gospel directly from Jesus Christ."

Up to this point, we have already discussed Paul's argument in the last number. "But then," Paul goes on, "even after my conversion, even after I had received the gospel from Christ, I did not become a disciple of the men upon whom the Judaizers say I am dependent. In the early period, I did not even have any contact with them at all. After my conversion I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but the journey that I made was to Arabia, and it was three years before I went up to Jerusalem."

### Harmony with Acts

The word "immediately," in the sixteenth verse, requires perhaps a word of comment. "When God was pleased to reveal His Son to me," Paul says, "immediately I conferred not with flesh or blood, nor (to be specific, to take up the special form of dependence upon flesh and blood which the Judaizers allege against me) did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia." Does the word "immediately" go with the negative part of the sentence only, or also with the positive part? Does Paul mean to say, "What I did not do immediately after my conversion was to go up to Jerusalem"; or does he mean to say, "What I did immediately after my conversion, instead of going up to Jerusalem, was to go away into Arabia"?

If the latter view is correct, then a difficulty might at first sight seem to arise when we compare this narrative with the one in the Book of Acts. In Acts, it is said that after Paul's conversion and the ensuing three days of blindness Paul "was with the disciples in Damascus some days,

and immediately he preached Jesus in the synagogues, that this is the Son of God." If Paul "immediately" preached Jesus in the synagogues, how could he at the same time have "immediately" gone away to Arabia?

The difficulty is not, however, by any means insuperable. Of course, it disappears altogether if Paul's "immediately," in Gal. 1:16, goes only with the negative part of the sentence that follows; for in that case Paul would be saying that he did not immediately go up to Jerusalem, but he would not be saying how soon the journey to Arabia occurred. But even if the "immediately" goes—grammatically at least—with the positive as well as with the negative part of the sentence, still the passage can be understood perfectly well in harmony with the Book of Acts.

"After my conversion," Paul says in effect, "what was it that immediately followed? Certainly it was not any visit to Jerusalem. There was indeed a journey away from Damascus in those early days, but it was a journey *away from Jerusalem—to Arabia—not to Jerusalem.*" The real point of the sentence is to deny that there was a journey to Jerusalem during those early days; it is not to establish the exact moment of the journey to Arabia. As has been well said by someone—in a place that we are unable to lay our hands on for the moment—when Paul uses the word "immediately" in connection with the journey to Arabia, he is thinking not in terms of days or of hours but of journeys. His journey at that time was not to Jerusalem but to Arabia.

Thus even if the word "immediately" goes with the positive as well as with the negative part of the sentence, still a brief period of preaching in Damascus after the conversion and before the journey to Arabia is not excluded. The journey to Arabia, which is not mentioned in Acts, may, therefore, be regarded as having

taken place after the preaching activity mentioned in Acts 9:20. It may be remarked in passing, however, that other hypotheses may be advanced, and have been advanced, as to the place where the journey to Arabia is to be inserted in the outline provided by the Book of Acts.

One important result already emerges from a consideration of this question. We observe already, namely, that the author of Acts has not made use of the Epistle to the Galatians in the construction of his narrative. The very difficulties which face us in our effort to put the two accounts together really constitute an important argument in favor of the early date and independent historical value of the Book of Acts. A later writer, composing his narrative at a time when information about Paul's life had become scanty, and being driven, therefore, to use the scattered autobiographical passages in the Pauline Epistles, would have made the harmony between his narrative and that in the Epistles altogether easy. Difficulties in the harmonizing of two narratives, on the other hand, arise when the narratives, no matter how trustworthy they may be, are independent of each other. It is really a fact of enormous importance for the defence of Luke-Acts, and not for the attack upon it, that differences of opinion arise, and may legitimately arise, as to the way in which the narrative in Acts is to be put together with the narrative in Galatians in the construction of as complete an account as possible of the life of Paul.

#### Arabia

Paul went away, he says, into Arabia. By "Arabia" he means, no doubt, the country of the Nabatean kings, of whom the one who was reigning at this time was Aretas IV. Since that country extended almost to the gates of Damascus, it is not necessary to suppose that he made a long journey into the great peninsula which we now commonly speak of as "Arabia." His journey may have been long or it may have been short; we simply do not know how long it was.

Moreover, we do not know how long a time Paul spent in Arabia. We only know that the time was less than three years; for Paul tells us that three years after the conversion he went up from Damascus to Jerusalem, and we learn

from Acts 9:20, 22, 23 that some of that period was spent in preaching in Damascus.

So far as what Paul tells us in Galatians is concerned, we might suppose that the stay in Arabia lasted only (say) a few weeks. Let it not be objected that so short a stay would not have been thought worthy of mention; for the importance of the journey to Arabia in Paul's argument is found not in the journey itself but in the contrast in which it stands with a journey to Jerusalem, which Paul is concerned to deny.

One consideration, perhaps, points to a somewhat longer stay in Arabia. It appears in the fact mentioned in Acts 9:26, that when Paul finally went up to Jerusalem the disciples there were afraid of him. Would they have been afraid of him if the three years since his conversion had been spent almost exclusively in his preaching (in a place so near as Damascus) of that faith which formerly he had laid waste? Is not their fear of him better explained if he had spent a large part of the time since his conversion in the remote region of Arabia?

This consideration, though it has some weight, is scarcely conclusive; and the wisest thing for us to do is to say frankly that we do not know how large a proportion of the three years was spent in Arabia and how large a proportion in Damascus.

#### Meditation or Preaching

What did Paul do when he was in Arabia? Two answers to this question have been given. Some have thought that he carried on a preaching activity there; others have thought rather that he engaged in meditation upon the implications of the wonderful new conviction that had come into his life through the appearance to him of the risen Christ. If we had to choose between these two views, we should certainly choose the second. Even if Paul preached in Arabia, he certainly did not neglect meditation and prayer; he was not like some modern pastors who are "too busy" to engage in intellectual and spiritual preparation for their sermons. Indeed, even in the later busy period of his life, when the care of all the churches rested upon him, Paul always gives evidence of being a man of thought as well as a man of action. Indeed, he was a man of action because he was a man of

thought; his wonderful life-work, which has changed the entire history of the world, was possible only because of great convictions meditated upon in the depths of his soul.

Happy would it be for the Church if we had more preachers like Paul in this respect today! There is a tremendous bustle in the lives of the typical preachers and pastors of the present time, but a singular lack of power. Perhaps one reason is that the preachers in question are neglecting to have recourse to the springs of power. Real preaching is born in long and laborious study of the Word of God and in the agony of the preacher's soul.

Paul may have engaged in preaching activity in Arabia; but we are inclined to think that the time which he spent there was predominantly a time of meditation and prayer, and of the study of the Old Testament Scriptures (which never ceased to be for Paul the authoritative Word of God) in the light of the wonderful new revelation that he had received from Christ.

#### The Place of Paul's Conversion

Certain it is that after the stay in Arabia he "returned again to Damascus." The form of expression here is not without importance. Paul has not told us so far where the conversion took place. The Book of Acts says it took place near Damascus; but the Book of Acts is under fire in modern criticism. The tendency of certain modern skeptical historians is to keep Paul as far as possible from Palestine and from those who had known Jesus during His earthly ministry. Thus a few of these historians have even denied that Paul ever was in Jerusalem prior to his conversion. Such denial of course is possible only on the basis of a thoroughgoing rejection of the testimony of Acts. Thus if it had been only the Book of Acts that places the conversion of Paul near Damascus, the narrative in Acts would hardly have escaped criticism at this point. Rather might the historians to whom we have referred have been inclined, in defiance of Acts, to place the conversion of Paul at a point far more conveniently remote from Palestine than Damascus was. But as a matter of fact Paul himself, in Galatians, one of the universally accepted Epistles, says that after his conversion he "returned again

to Damascus." If he "returned" to Damascus, he must have been there before, and the conversion must have taken place in or near that city. Thus the assertion of Acts as to the place of the conversion is incidentally confirmed. We may well surmise that if Paul had had occasion to give other details many more elements in the narrative in Acts would similarly have been confirmed.

#### Paul and Peter

Three years after the conversion, Paul went up from Damascus to Jerusalem. The manner of his departure from Damascus was remarkable. According to his own account in II Cor. 11:32, 33, as well as according to the account in Acts 9:23-25, he escaped from his enemies by being lowered through the wall of the city in a basket.

He went up to Jerusalem, he tells us in Galatians, "to make the acquaintance of Cephas"—calling Peter, here as usually, by the Aramaic name of which "Peter" is a translation—and he remained with him fifteen days. We cannot be sure of all that occurred within that fifteen-day period. But one thing can be said with some confidence—Paul did not neglect the opportunity of listening to what Peter had to tell concerning the words and deeds of Jesus. When Paul speaks, as he does in Galatians, of his apostolic independence, of the fact that he has not received his gospel from the original apostles or from any other mere men, he does not mean that he was indifferent to factual information which came to him by ordinary word of mouth from those who had been with Jesus when He was on earth. Much of such information had already come to him before his conversion; for the public ministry of Jesus was not a thing done in a corner, and Paul was intensely interested in it, though only as an enemy. But after the conversion the fund of such information would be enormously increased, not only through Paul's contact with humble Christians in Damascus, but also, and particularly, when he came into personal contact with the chief of Jesus' intimate disciples. The incidental way in which Paul writes in his Epistles here and there about events in the life of Jesus or elements of His teaching shows clearly not only that such incidental references proceed from a far

larger store of knowledge which he possessed himself, but also that they are parts, chosen as need arose, of a store of information which he had given to the churches in his initial teaching.

#### Paul and Jesus

What Paul does mean, when he says that he received his gospel not through a man but through Jesus Christ, is that neither Peter nor any other disciple of Jesus made him a Christian by taking him and leading him, through instruction or persuasion, to see that his hostile view of what he had heard about Jesus was false and that really this was the Messiah and the Saviour. That conviction—that new attitude toward the information which he had received—came, Paul says, from Jesus Himself, when He appeared to him on the road to Damascus; and directly from Jesus, moreover, not through Peter or any other mere man, did he receive his commission to preach that gospel of the truth of which he had thus become convinced. To some extent at least, Paul had heard the gospel even before his conversion. But it was not that hearing of the gospel which made him an apostle. What made him an apostle was the direct impartation of the gospel to him by Jesus Christ, partly confirming the truth of what he had already heard, but partly also leading him, no doubt, into a new fulness of truth.

To make Paul indifferent to the details of Jesus' life, to make him indifferent to what he heard from Peter and others about what Jesus had said and done, is to interpret certain passages in Galatians with entire disregard, not only of the Book of Acts, but also of certain other passages in Paul's own Epistles. In particular, it is to neglect the important passage, I Cor. 15:3-8, where Paul appeals, in support even of the central fact of the resurrection, not only to his own testimony but also to the testimony of Peter and of the Twelve and of the five hundred brethren who saw the risen Christ. And in I Cor. 15:11 Paul says in the clearest possible manner that his gospel was the same as that of the original apostles. "Whether, therefore," he says, "it be I or they, so we preach and so ye believed."

Surely it is a mere caricature of New Testament exegesis if we represent Paul as saying to Peter, during those fifteen

days which he spent with him three years after the conversion, when Peter quite naturally started to tell him something about his intercourse in Galilee with the Lord: "Stop, Peter; you must not tell me anything that you heard Jesus say or saw Jesus do while He was with you on earth, because if you do you will impair my apostolic independence." On the contrary, the two men of course spoke of those wonderful events of which Peter was the best possible eyewitness; and it is natural to surmise that it was during that fifteen-day visit that Paul "received" the precious summary of the death, burial, resurrection and appearances of Christ which he reproduces in I Cor. 15:3ff. No doubt he had already learned in Damascus some or all of what appears in that summary; but authoritative, confirmation of it—perhaps even the summary formulation of it which we have in the passage just mentioned—was in all probability received from Peter during that important first visit of Paul to Jerusalem after the conversion. Certainly it did not at all make Paul a disciple of Peter, as the Judaizers apparently said he was; it did not impair in the slightest his independent apostolic authority or overthrow the thesis, which he is establishing in this first great division of this Epistle, that he was an apostle not from men nor through a man but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead.

#### A Message from Mongolia

The following message has been received by China Inland Mission from three intrepid pioneer missionaries—Miss Mildred Cable and the Misses Eva and Francesca French:—"Camp near Edzingol River, Mongolo. Greeting! From the wilds of Mongolia, twelve days from a post office, we entrust this card to a merchant, hoping it may reach its destination. For the first time since the days of the Nestorians the Christian missionary has come among the tent-dwellers of Edzingol. The darkness, ignorance and Satanic bondage is indescribable, and it is with a burdened spirit we are driving the point of the plough through the tangled masses of Lamaistic superstition which loves darkness and hates light. Who will come to tell these people of Christ in the Mongolian language?"