Saul’s Experience with Christ

Acts 9:1-12

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INTRODUCTION

ORIENTATION AND CONTEXT

Significance of Text

The experience of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus is originally told in Acts 9:1-12, but is repeated two other times in Acts 22:3-16 and Acts 26:9-18. The repetition of the story in Acts 22 and Acts 26 implies the importance of the account. This passage gains its significance not only from the repetition of the account itself, but also from the issues addressed within it.

Within the Acts 9 account, there is a distinct acknowledgment of the persecution of Christians by the hand of Saul. In addition there is a focus on the extraordinary means that God uses to demand Saul’s attention. Overall, the account details and addresses how God brings two opposing religious groups together in a way that both groups of the day would have considered inconceivable.

In addition, the Acts 9 account of Saul of Tarsus gets significance from the implications it gives to the church of the time as well as Christianity in general. This passage portrays Saul in a light that gives him potential to become one of the most powerful advocates for the church. It comes from his previous status as a persecutor of the church. Additionally, Saul’s experience with God on the road to Damascus gives proof to the divine nature of Christianity itself (Lyttelton in Bruce 196).

Themes that manifest themselves in Acts 9 are most notably the theophanies of God and reconciliation. Within the Acts 9 account, Saul, bent on persecuting the early Christian church, heads for Damascus with a letter from authorities giving him permission to persecute the Christians there. On the way, he experiences the Lord in a way that could be compared to Ezekiel’s vision and calling from the Lord (Allison par. 1). The description of light and voices
that Saul hears from heaven are factors that lead scholars to believe the passage contains elements of theophanies (Matthews 1936). Saul speaks with the Lord, only to come out of the experience physically blind. Once in Damascus, while Saul is fasting, the Lord asks a Christian believer named Ananias in a vision to pray over Saul that he might regain his sight. The overall actions of God to demand Saul’s attention as well as the use of a Christian in Damascus to pray over Saul points to the theme of reconciliation in the passage.

A question that arises from this passage is why God chose to give Saul the experience of Acts 9 on his way to Damascus. Out of all the cities Saul had been through persecuting the Christians, why did God choose to stop him on the road to Damascus? Moreover, the question arises as to what the implications are for the blindness Saul experienced and the fasting he went through once in Damascus. Opinions on the depth of the importance of those two things are wide and varied.

**Historical and Social Setting**


The dates of the book of Acts, including Acts 9, are argued over by many. Some argue a date in the middle of the first century with the book culminating around AD 62 when Paul was imprisoned in Rome (Cannon par. 1). This is because the accounts in Acts correspond with the situation of Rome during that time. Others argue, however, for a later date of AD 80-95. This is
because it is after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, before *corpus Paulinum*, and after Paul’s death around AD 62-65 (Powers). The majority view on the date of Acts is AD 80-95 (Matthews 1919).


Luke does not mention the sources he uses to write the book of Acts (Matthews 1920). Scholars readily state that though there are no proven sources used by Luke in the book of Acts, that does not negate the fact that they might exist (Johnson 3-4).

The setting for the passage of Acts 9 is Damascus and the road leading up to it. In the passage, Saul requested letters from the high priest, implying he would have been coming from Jerusalem to Damascus. The road he would have taken from Jerusalem to Damascus is entitled The Great North Road (Fitzmyer 423). Damascus, around the time of Saul’s experience in Acts 9, was a thriving trade center and city, a part of the Decapolis of Rome in Syria (Longenecker 852). The city itself was old and had been under the control of many different nations. At the time of Acts 9, it was controlled by a Nabatean ruler and according to Josephus, had a large number of Jews residing there (Fitzmyer 423).

The social situation in Acts 9 is one of oppositions. Saul himself was born the son of a Pharisee and studied orthodox Judaism under the great Gamaliel (Hiebert 756-757). In Acts 9, he
is portrayed as the enemy of the church of Christ (Willimon 75). The traditional Jewish leaders portrayed the new Christian church and the belief in Christ as a false teaching. This portrayal led to Saul viewing the new beliefs about Jesus as a “pernicious and deadly contagion within Israel” (Longenecker 852), and doing whatever possible to stop its growth.

**Literary Context**

The book of Acts is narrative in genre. Within that narrative genre, Luke uses two specific literary devices that are especially important; Geography and prophecy. Luke consistently moves the narrative in Acts towards Jerusalem. He also places importance on the fulfillment of prophecies and puts special emphasis on describing the prophecies in the book of Acts that are fulfilled (Johnson 10-12). Within this structure and these literary devices, Luke has also placed speeches or sermons. These sermons are usually the recounting of past stories by the speakers, and can have many different educational goals to them as well. Luke also uses summaries in order to make a point in his writing of Acts, and parallelism is apparent on multiple occasions in the book. This kind of genre is best interpreted by reading all the way through and focusing on the context around certain events to get a better understanding.

The passage in Acts 9 is best described as a narrative. The details are set up very chronologically, and in a very historical way. Although there are a lot of different literary devices within the book of Acts, the account in Acts 9 does not include any of them except the narrative genre.

The placement of Saul’s experience in Acts 9 is methodical. In chapter 8 of Acts, Luke continues over from chapter 7 with the persecution of the church by Saul. He addresses the opposite by then detailing the ministry of Philip and the continued growth of the Christian church despite persecution. Luke draws a contrast between the intensity of the persecution of the
church and its growth at the same time. Acts 9 is the continuation of this contrast and immediately follows an account of the ministry of Philip. It details the experience of Saul on the road to Damascus, his conversion and calling, and then his joining the persecuted church in Damascus. Immediately following that, Luke begins to set the stage for a parallel between Peter’s ministry to the Jews and Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles.

The passage in Acts 9 that this paper discusses begins in Acts 9:1 with Luke’s switch from Philip’s ministry to Saul’s determination to persecute the Christian church in Damascus. It ends in Acts 9:12 with the vision of Ananias and the Lord finishing his command to Ananias concerning Saul.

**PRESENTATION OF TEXT**

**Scripture Passage**

Acts 9:1-12 “Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” 5 He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” 11 The Lord said to him, “Get up
and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” ” (NRSV)

Text Critical Notes

In verse 4 of Acts 9 some manuscripts add in the phrase “it is hard for you to kick against the goads,” or “what shall I do?” Occasionally they will also describe Saul as “trembling and astonished.” These are not phrases found in the original Greek texts, but pulled by newer versions from the Acts 26 and Acts 22 accounts of this experience (Gateway par. 5). Some Latin manuscripts add to Saul’s words in verse 8 by having him ask his friends with him “raise me from the ground.” Other manuscripts state that he saw “no one” instead of “nothing” (Johnson 163). Lastly, the words “in a vision” are not found in some of the earliest best manuscripts of verse 12. This is argued to be because some of the early scribes may have viewed the words as repetitive from verse 10 and thus omitted them. Arguments against that stance point out that the vision in verse 10 is a different vision than the one in verse 12 (Harris par. 12).

Outline of Passage

I. Plans for Persecution (vv. 1-2)
   A. Threats and Murder
   B. Request for Letters
   C. Damascus and Christians

II. Saul’s Plans Interrupted (vv. 3-9)
   B. Encounter on the Road
      1. Physical Divine Intervention
      2. Conversation with the Voice
C. Going to Damascus Blind

III. Ananias Called to Saul (vv. 10-12)

A. Calling in Vision

B. Instructions for Action

PLANS FOR PERSECUTION

The use of the word “still” to start off the passage in Acts 9 is Luke’s way of connecting Saul with his earlier appearance in chapter 8 (Johnson 162). The word implies a continuation of the persecution of the Christians by Saul since his first acknowledgment at the stoning of Stephen (Fitzmyer 422). It is argued that Saul, being so entrenched in following the Mosaic law and the Jewish leaders, found himself completely justified and scripturally backed in his attempts to quell the new Christian movement (Longenecker 851).

This argument is logical because during the time period, the Sanhedrin (including the high priest) refused to consider Christ as Messiah. This meant they were in favor of punishment for any who believed he was. The high priest, being president of the Sanhedrin, was head of Jewish authority (Barabas 895-896). This authority was not only recognized by the Roman powers of the time and the Jewish communities of Palestine, but also those farther outside of Palestine (Bruce 193). Thus it is logical to conclude that if the Jewish leaders felt this way, Saul then felt fully justified in his actions to pursue the Christians within Damascus. It was an effort to purify the land of what he thought was false religion.

In Acts 9:2, Luke states that Saul went to the high priest and “requested letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (NRSV). The account in chapter 9 does not explicitly state that Saul received those letters, although the accounts in chapters 22 and 26 confirm that he
did (Fitzmyer 423). There is debate over the legal authority these letters gave Saul in Damascus (Conzelmann 71). Some sources argue that the authority from the Sanhedrin could give Saul power of extradition for fugitives, but not for Jews in the diaspora and more importantly the Christian Jews he was after. In summary, the argument among scholars revolves around whether the letters Saul obtained gave him permission to touch the Christian Jews frequenting the synagogues, or just the ones considered fugitives. The conclusion this paper draws is simple: Saul was after the Christian Jews that were frequenting the synagogues in Damascus because the letters he requests are for the leaders of those synagogues. In addition, he must have received authority from the Sanhedrin in the letters to target those Christians because verse 3 portrays Paul as “going along and approaching Damascus…” (NRSV).

Damascus itself is not mentioned by Luke in his descriptions of the expansion of the Christian church (Johnson 162); however, the goal of Saul to attack Christians within Damascus points to just how far the Christian church was spreading (Packer 71). There is evidence that the number of Jews living in Damascus was significant due to the fact that 10,000-20,000 of them are mentioned by Josephus as being massacred there in AD 66 (Bruce 194). It is unknown what the number of Christian Jews was in Damascus. The viewpoint of some is that Damascus was the target of Saul not only because of the large Jewish community, but also because of its center for trade and capacity to handle large numbers of people. With this as a factor, the city would have facilitated a faster spread of the Christian faith (Cannon par. 2). A fair conclusion would be that Saul targeted Damascus and the Christian Jews there because of both reasons. The larger Jewish community would have offered him a larger percentage of Christian Jews to attack. The thriving trade and general pace of people moving through the city would have also been a source of
worry for his anti-Christ views. As mentioned above, Damascus would have easily come across as a threat to the purity of the Jewish faith in Saul’s eyes.

The term “Way” is first coined and used in Acts 9:2 to describe the Christian Jews. In verse 2, Luke describes Saul asking the high priest for letters to go to Damascus so that if he found “any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” The origin of the term for Christians is uncertain (Longenecker 853), although some believe it was the Christian’s way of linking themselves to Jesus and his statement of being “the Way” in John 14:6 (Packer 72). The original Greek word used in this passage for “Way” is “hodos” (Johnson 162). This New Testament word can mean “road” or a progress such as “the route, act or distance.” In addition, it can be a mode or means such as a “journey” or “highway” (Strong 51). In a metaphorical way, this word is also used as a course of conduct or a “way of thinking, feeling, deciding” (Thayer and Smith par. 4). The use of this Greek word is found multiple times throughout the New Testament. Jesus uses the word in John 14:6 when he says “I am the Way, the truth, and the life…” (NRSV). The word is also used in places such as Luke 3:4 that state “Prepare ye the way of the Lord…” (NRSV). Thus, the Christians of “the Way” could also in this passage be called those of “the road” or “the journey,” directly pointing to a connection with their following of Christ.

SAUL’S PLANS INTERRUPTED

The experience of light from heaven in verse 3 of Acts 9 has characteristics of theophanies in other parts of the Bible (Johnson 163). Though Luke avoids saying that Saul saw the figure of the Lord (Conzelmann 71), this light along with Saul’s response of falling to the ground indicates that something divine is happening (Willimon 75). The Greek word that is used in this passage for “light” is “phos.” The meaning of this word is “to shine” or “manifest.” It can
also mean “luminousness” (Strong 77). In addition, this word can describe a heavenly light of any sort (Thayer and Smith par. 4). The same Greek word is used in John 8:12 when Jesus says “I am the light of the world…” (NRSV), and in Luke 17:2 to describe the light of Jesus’ transfiguration before his disciples. Put into context with the other uses of this word, there is evidence that the light described in Acts 9 is not only a divine light, but also the light of Christ himself.

The voice that calls out to Saul when he falls to the ground repeats his name two times. This repetition of Saul’s name can be connected to Old Testament characters and their experiences of divine calling (Bruce 195). This connection adds to evidence that the experience of Saul in Acts 9 on the road to Damascus was divine in nature.

“Why do you persecute me?” is the first question the Lord asks Saul when he calls his name. Some versions add in the phrase “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” after the initial question. This additional phrase is found in the Acts 26 version of the account, but early manuscripts do not contain it in the Acts 9 account (Gateway par. 6). Because the phrase is not in the original Acts 9 manuscripts and only in a few modern versions, it is unnecessary to address the importance of this phrase within this passage.

Saul responds to the Lord’s question in verse 4 by asking, “Who are you, Lord?” The use of the word “Lord” in Saul’s response is the Greek word “kurios.” This word means “supremacy” or “controller” (Strong 44). It was also used as a respectful greeting for those in authority of the time (Thayer and Smith par. 4). It is used in the Scriptures as both a name for God and also as a respectful greeting by people to figures in authority. It is argued by some that Saul’s use of this word in Acts 9:5 is a respectful greeting as a servant to a master. This implies he didn’t realize he was talking to God at all (Fitzmyer 425). Others argue that in Acts 9:5, Saul
knew he was involved in a theophany and was speaking to God, but didn’t realize he was talking
to Jesus Christ specifically (Johnson 163). The most probable conclusion is that Saul knew he
was involved in a divine encounter, but as evidenced in his question, did not know to whom he
was speaking, whether it be Christ, another human being, or God the Father (Longenecker 853-
854).

Saul’s question is answered in Acts 9:5 when the reply is “I am Jesus, whom you are
persecuting…” (NRSV). This reply proves two things. It proves to Saul in a moment that Jesus,
who he did not believe in and who he thought was dead, was alive (Longenecker 854). It also
reveals the nature of Christ as identifying with his followers and experiencing the same
persecution they experience (Fitzmyer 425). This statement of Jesus is not left for Saul to think
over though, and immediately following, Saul receives the command to get up, go into the city,
and wait for instructions.

The Acts 9 account describes Saul’s companions as “speechless” because they “heard the
sound” but did not see anyone. Acts 22 states Saul’s companions “saw the light” but “didn’t
understand the voice.” Finally, in Acts 26 it states that Saul’s companions fell to the ground with
him when they saw the light. These three different accounts of the experiences of Saul’s
companions are only reconcilable by focusing on the motives behind the experience. This divine
experience and theophany that Saul experiences on the way to Damascus was directed towards
and of vital importance for him individually, not his companions as a group.

The blindness Saul experiences upon getting up from the ground is argued by some to be
a punishment for Saul from God (Johnson 163). Others argue it is not a punishment but a
physical reaction of Saul’s humanly inadequate eyes to the intensity of the divine light he
experienced (Bruce 197). Still others argue that the blindness was a physical way God could
show Saul his own spiritual blindness to the truth (Cannon par. 3). Finally, most scholars agree that the intention of the blindness was to show the weakness of Saul in contrast with the strength of Jesus (Conzelmann 72). The most probable stance on these varying views includes factors from each of them. It is likely that the blindness of Saul was a physical reaction of his body to the divine light he had seen. Along with that, however, comes many of the above spiritual lessons for Saul as well as the rest of the church that God could have wanted to communicate. With the implications of these spiritual lessons in mind, it is no wonder that Saul spent three days in Damascus fasting and praying.

Fasting itself can be associated with many different situations. Though verse 9 only states that Saul was fasting, verse 11 indicates that Saul was also praying, evidencing the fact that fasting and praying was a common combination in that time (Johnson 164). Repentance can go alongside fasting as well, but preparation can also go alongside fasting. Some scholars believe the fasting of Saul was in preparation for his instructions from God (Johnson 164), while others believe it was a time of reflection and repentance for him on his past (Bruce 72). The conclusion this paper draws is that Saul’s fasting had elements of all the above ideas. He may have been fasting in repentance, but preparation and reflection were most likely involved in the fasting as well.

ANANIAS CALLED TO SAUL

The description of Ananias as a “disciple” in verse 10 places him in the group of people Saul intended to carry off to Jerusalem. The contrast of God using Saul’s targeted enemy to heal him is one of the greatest contrasts within the passage of Acts 9 (Fitzmyer 426). Luke leaves no question within the passage that Ananias is the one being called to Saul and that God is the one calling him.
The Lord approaches Ananias in a vision calling his name. Ananias’s response, unlike Saul’s questioning response of the Lord on the road, is a faithful and biblical “here I am, Lord” (Willimon 76). The Lord’s instructions for Ananias are explicit and direct. Straight street was one of the main streets within the city of Damascus (Bruce 199). The house of Judas, Saul’s host was along that street. Ananias is instructed in his vision from God to go and “lay his hands on him [Saul] so that he might regain his sight” (NRSV).

CONCLUSION

SUMMATION

The Christian church of the time was under pressure because of its belief in Jesus Christ. The Christian Jews believed Jesus was the Messiah, while the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin refused to accept the idea. At the beginning of Acts 9, Saul of Tarsus was strictly against the Christian Jews. Requesting letters from the Sanhedrin and attempting to go after Christian Jews in one of the larger cities of the Roman Decapolis proves his dedication to his beliefs.

Saul’s intensity and dedication to fight against the Christian church, though, gave him the potential to become one of the most powerful advocates for it. This can be evidenced by the intense, divine way God called him out of spiritual blindness into light. Saul’s direction in life is changed drastically when he interacts with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Christ’s interaction with Saul contains many implications for God’s character. Christ’s identification with the persecution of his followers as well as the intense way he reaches out to his enemies is evident in Acts 9. In addition, the calling of Ananias in a vision to go and pray over Saul points out the contrast between the actions of Christ and his followers and the world.

The main message of this passage to the church of that time was first that Christ was alive and still working miracles. Secondly, it was that the character of God is not only strength
and power, but also love and reconciliation of the deepest kind. In addition, the message of Saul’s experience with God gave the church of that day hope that it was growing in the right direction and that Christ himself was fighting with and for it.

**APPLICATION**

The message for the contemporary church from the passage in Acts 9 is very similar if not the same as it was for the original church of that day. The resurrected Jesus appears in a very physical way to Saul on the road to Damascus. The contemporary church can struggle with the idea that when Christ was raised and ascended, he left the church with instructions but not a physical presence. Acts 9 addresses that idea directly. Not only does Jesus speak with Saul and prove that he is alive and working miracles, but he also gives Saul instructions for how to proceed. This communicates a deep interest by Christ into the lives of his followers.

In addition to that, Acts 9 also proves that the character of God is more multifaceted and his ways more incomprehensible than imagined. Taking a direct enemy of the church and calling him to be one of the most powerful and influential advocates for it would be considered unthinkable in the human mind. But yet Christ’s divine theophany to Saul on the road to Damascus proved God’s character to be more powerful and out-of-the-box than the church of the day had thought. In addition, the reconciliation and love that God showed in the calling and conversion of Saul and through Ananias is evidence of a deeper care and concern for the lost than most human beings could have ever imagined.

These messages are true for not only the church of Saul’s day, but also for today. God’s character does not change as evidenced throughout scripture. If his character does not change, and Acts 9 reveals these aspects of God’s love to the world, then the modern day church can be assured that God was the same yesterday, today, and will be tomorrow.
WORKS CITED


