Revelatory Experiences and Religious Innovation in Earliest Christianity

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Over the last twenty-five years or so I have studied, and urged the historical importance of, the remarkable “dyadic” devotional pattern that we have reflected already in our earliest extant Christian texts, in which Jesus features in a programmatic way alongside God, and I have contended that it represents a noteworthy (so far as I know, unique) innovation in the second-temple Jewish tradition in which this dyadic devotional pattern first appeared. One of my concerns in this work has been to try to account for this innovation, or, as I have also labelled it, this novel “mutation” in second-temple Jewish devotional practice. In so far as this innovation was novel and became historically significant, it is all the more worthwhile to explore the forces and factors that may have prompted and shaped it.

My earliest effort to do so was in a book initially published in 1988, in a section in the final chapter headed “Causes of the Christian Mutation.”¹ There, among relevant factors, I proposed as particularly important religious experiences that had a revelatory effect and generated the convictions that God had exalted Jesus to heavenly/divine glory and now required him to be treated as a recipient of cultic devotion.² In that discussion, I suggested specifically “visions and other experiences that communicated the risen and exalted Christ,” citing several NT texts as reflecting these sorts of experiences (e.g., Acts 7:55-56; 2 Cor 3:4–4:6; Rev 1:12–3:22; 5:1-13), and in several subsequent publications I have reiterated and elaborated somewhat this proposal. In particular, I sought to support this proposal more fully in my 1998 T. W. Manson lecture, “Religious Experience and Religious Innovation in the New Testament,” later published.³ In this lecture I take up an invitation to visit the topic again, reviewing the warrants for my proposal, the specific kinds of experiences in question, and how the study of religious experiences in early Christianity has fared in scholarly discussion.

² Although it has generated some controversy, I acknowledge that this was not a fully novel proposal, and readily point to the pioneering discussion by Adolf Deissmann, Paul - A Study in Social and Religious History, 2nd ed. (1927; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1957; German original 1911), esp. 122-23.
³ Larry W. Hurtado, “Religious Experience and Religious Innovation in the New Testament,” JR 80 (2000): 183-205, and republished in id., How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 179-204. In the present lecture I cite the latter publication, which incorporates some small changes from the earlier version. I have also discussed the matter as one of the “forces and factors” that generated cultic devotion to Jesus in Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 64-74.
Revelatory Experiences: Definition

Before we turn to these matters, however, I should probably explain briefly what I mean by “revelatory” experiences. Of course, as William James observed in his classic study, “religious” experiences are of various kinds in intensity and nature.¹ Probably in the overwhelming number of instances, religious experiences produce or confirm in the recipients a sense of a divine or other transcendent reality, often reaffirming and making existentially real and personally meaningful the beliefs, teachings, and/or religious orientation with which recipients are already acquainted. Such experiences may be comparatively less intense (but still very meaningful), as, for example, may be the case for a Christian in a time of private prayer and/or meditation or in corporate worship, perhaps confirming a particular sense of that testified to in a given biblical text, hymn or sermon. Or such a confirmatory experience might be comparatively more intense, as in the testimonies of people who have cathartic experiences of “conversion” in which they find themselves powerfully moved to embrace, or return to, a faith that they were taught or knew about but previously rejected or ignored. My point is that in all such experiences, the cognitive effect is to confirm, reinforce, and in general to “bring home” to the recipient a belief or sense of things that is not something new.

But there are also some religious experiences reported that strike the recipients as disclosing some new truth, or some new or significantly revised conviction or understanding, perhaps some significant re-interpretation or re-configuring of the previous religious tradition (as might be illustrated in the “Jesus only” movement within early Pentecostalism or in Bahá U’llah’s sense of a divine call to serve as God’s promised messenger), or even the inauguration of a new tradition (as, e.g., may be the case in the account of Guru Nanak’s sense of appointment to transcend the conflicts of Hindu and Muslim traditions). In still other cases, the “revelation” in question might be more modest in content and implications, such as a new insight into a previous belief or a new understanding of a scriptural text, or simply a solution to some important question or problem. But, whether their cognitive content may seem comparatively smaller or larger, by “revelatory” experiences, I reiterate that I mean those that communicate something new or revised, sometimes something that is valid or relevant for others and not simply the recipient, and so issuing in a sense of calling to disseminate the revelation. Obviously, there is also a social dimension when any

“revelatory” experience succeeds in generating a following who affirm the innovation experientially received by the recipient of the revelation. I cannot devote sufficient attention to this matter here. In this discussion I simply want to emphasize the cognitive impact that is typically involved in such experiences.

I also want to note that there may not always be a correlation between the significance of the content of the revelatory experience and the outward form of the experience. There are reports that involve dramatic events. For example, in the Acts account of Paul’s “Damascus Road” experience (Acts 9:1-9), he is struck by a blinding light, falls to the ground, hears the voice of the risen Jesus, and is left incapacitated for several days thereafter; and this narrative has been rendered visually often in Christian art (such as on the poster for this lecture). But in his own brief reference to his experience in Galatians 1:15-16, Paul simply says that it was a revelation of God’s “Son” (Jesus) and that it also conveyed to him a powerful sense of divine ordination and calling to proclaim Jesus among “the nations”. To be sure, in 2 Corinthians 12 Paul refers to multiple “visions and revelations of the Lord” and to their surpassing nature (or number) (2 Cor 12:1, 7), and he even relates here one such experience, from fourteen years earlier and in a curiously guarded manner (2 Cor 12:2-5). In this context, he portrays himself as reluctant to mention these experiences, and it is clear that he wishes to avoid focusing on phenomenological details, underscoring instead certain religious themes, especially dependence on Christ’s grace and power expressed in Paul’s “weaknesses”.

My point is that what makes certain experiences “revelatory” (at least in the circles shaped by biblical traditions) is not so much the physiological effects or some dramatic phenomena, but instead the recipient’s perception of new cognitive content and, as in Paul’s case, the accompanying sense that some divine commission is conveyed. Certainly, as April DeConick has contended, “visionary” or “visual” experiences, e.g., involving a vision of a divinity or heavenly being, were sought and reported often enough, among ancient Jews and gentiles, and among circles of emergent Christianity. But also, in the biblical tradition of prophetic revelations, there is a strong emphasis on auditory and verbal phenomena, the

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5 Does τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἄποκαλυπτῶν (2 Cor 12:7) refer to their exceptional number or “the exceptional character of the revelations” (NRSV)? For discussion of Paul’s “boasting” about his experiences in 2 Cor 12, see, e.g., C. K. Barrett, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (Black’s New Testament Commentaries; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1973), 305-14.

recipient “hearing” a message from God, and with it a commission that this message is then to be communicated to others.7

The Scholarly Context

In my essay mentioned earlier, I briefly surveyed scholarly studies of religious experiences in the New Testament and earliest Christianity, noting how comparatively few there were in the oceanic body of publications by specialists in this field. In the years since that essay appeared, however, there have been some further encouraging signs of scholarly interest in religious experiences. As noted already, DeConick has been a major contributor to scholarly discussion about religious experiences, especially “mystical” and “visionary” experiences in ancient Jewish and Christian circles. In addition to her own publications, she was also a leading figure in the program-unit of the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, “Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism,” which met 1996-2006.

One of the emphases she and others have posited is the connection between such mystical experiences and “transformation,” sometimes involving a kind of quasi-deification of the recipient, a state that in some texts is likened to that of angels. One of the other scholarly contributors who has emphasized this is Morray-Jones, who uses the term “transformational mysticism.”8 For my purposes, it is noteworthy that this “mystical” transformation is sometimes described more specifically by recipients in cognitive terms, as involving endowment with the knowledge of divine secrets, and/or a special understanding of divine purposes, and/or new interpretation of sacred texts (a matter to which I return later).

Another noteworthy contributor has been John Levison, in both his 1997 book, The Spirit in First Century Judaism, and later in his major and programmatic study, Filled with the Spirit (2009).9 The latter volume ranges impressively across ancient Jewish and Christian texts, analysing how experience/reception of the divine Spirit is portrayed. Though controversial in some of its claims, it is a stimulating, and important contribution to ancient Jewish and Christian references to the divine Spirit. Levison is also the editor of a recently inaugurated series, “Ekstasis: Religious Experience from Antiquity to the Middle Ages”

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7 For biblical traditions, see, e.g., Jer 1:4-13, where reception of a divine message is central, although then there are visionary phenomena (vv. 11-13), and likewise, in Isa 6:1-13 and Ezek 1:1–3:11. Other texts mention only the reception of a “word of the Lord”; e.g., Amos 1:1; Micah 1:1; et al. It is noteworthy that in his reference to a heavenly ascent (2 Cor 12:2-5), Paul mentions having heard things that were not to be reported, his emphasis falling upon an auditory experience here.


9 John R. Levison, The Spirit in First Century Judaism, AGAJU 29 (Leiden: Brill, 1997); id., Filled with the Spirit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).
(published by DeGruyter, three volumes to date), which will provide encouragement for further studies.

I should also mention a recent program-unit in the SBL, “Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Early Christianity,” which began only a few years ago. The stated interests include (1) practices such as ritual, prayer, ecstasy, dreams and visions, (2) the relationship between texts and experiences, (3) the ways embodied experience generates religious ideas and commitment and (4) cognitive, neurological and sensory aspects of religious feeling. The scope of this work includes the sort of focus I pursue here, but I am not aware of much work specifically focused on the connection between religious experience and religious innovation. I do not intend here a complete listing, but only illustrative indications of an encouraging interest in religious experiences that continues and may even be growing somewhat among scholars in ancient Judaism and Christianity.

One further matter to reiterate from my earlier discussion is simply that, although many scholars in early Christianity have often seemed insensitive to the significance of revelatory experiences in the emergence of religious innovations, among some social scientists there is a greater acceptance of this. Indeed, I drew heavily upon some of these particular scholars in framing my own proposal about the role of revelatory experiences in earliest Christian circles. I shall not repeat here the details of my earlier discussion, but I do need to emphasize a few points.

First, it is simplistic to regard religious experiences as only derivative from prior beliefs and to fail to see that religious experiences can modify beliefs and/or generate new ones, in some cases resulting in significant innovations. In an essay now regarded as a classic, Anthony Wallace noted the frequency with which significant religious innovations (which he referred to as “religious revitalization” movements) stemmed from such revelatory experiences. Several decades ago Rodney Stark made similar observations about the capacity of certain “revelational” experiences to generate religious innovations, even “to contradict and challenge prevailing theological ‘truths’,” noting that such innovations can

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10 In Hurtado, “Religious Experience” (184) I noted “a continuing widespread reluctance” toward the idea that revelatory experiences can be factors generating religious innovation, contrasting this with some more helpful analyses by social scientists (186-91).

11 Note, e.g., Philip Almond’s observation (Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine: An Investigation of the Study of Mysticism in World Religions [Berlin: Mouton, 1982], 183) that sometimes “mystical” experiences “may be decisive in the formulation or revision of doctrinal frameworks,” and Carl Raschke’s recognition (“Revelation and Conversion: A Semantic Appraisal,” ATR 60 [1978]: 420-36, citing 422, 424) that revelatory experiences involve “an insight accruing from the transposition of certain meaning systems,” and the reconstitution of previous notions/beliefs (these cited in Hurtado, “Religious Experience,” 185).

produce “new theologies, eschatological prophecies, or commissions to launch social reforms.”

In another essay Stark judged that people experience “revelations sufficiently profound to serve as the basis of new religions.”

In my own field, I point to the judgement of the great Adolf Deissmann that “reacting cults” (his term for new religious movements) typically originate “out of the exceptionally moving religious experiences of exceptional people.”

Second, it is also a fallacy to regard all revelatory religious experiences as indicative of some sort of psychopathology. Although he referred to them as “hallucinatory visions,” Wallace noted clear differences between revelatory religious experiences and the delusions of those suffering genuine mental disorders, acknowledging with some surprise that “the religious vision per se is not psychopathological but rather the reverse, being a synthesizing and often therapeutic process.”

Also, in an essay that I cited in the Manson lecture, Stark lamented widespread social scientific notions that revelatory experiences signalled mental problems, urging that “normal people” (meaning mentally healthy people) have such experiences. Disturbed people can experience what they take to be divine revelations or directives, but so can “normal”, psychologically healthy people. To assume otherwise is sheer uninformed prejudice.

As one further point from my Manson lecture, I emphasize that to treat revelatory religious experiences as significant in generating significant religious innovations does not involve a theological judgement about the religious validity of the experiences. Instead, for the purposes of historical analysis and understanding, we only need recognize the efficacy of revelatory experiences in contributing to such innovations.

The Religious Innovation: Jesus-Devotion

I turn now to consider some specifics indications that revelatory experiences in earliest Christian circles were factors helping to generate religious innovation. In my view, perhaps the most remarkable innovation that characterized earliest Christianity was the inclusion of Jesus as recipient of cultic devotion, along with God in the devotional practices evident in earliest Christian texts. This produced what I refer to as a distinctive “dyadic devotional pattern” in which these two figures were both distinguished and uniquely linked in religious

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15 Deissmann, Paul, 121.
discourse and, as or more importantly in historical terms, linked in a constellation of devotional practices.\(^\text{18}\)

Moreover, despite the best efforts of some earlier scholars, including the influential Wilhelm Bousset, to attribute the origins of cultic Jesus-devotion to the influence of pagan religiosity in diaspora settings, the devotional practices in question seem in fact to have originated in earliest circles of Jewish believers (including Aramaic-speaking circles) and characterized them as well as the predominantly gentile circles such as Pauline congregations.\(^\text{19}\) That is, we are dealing with a noteworthy innovation or “mutation” that originated (or, to put it vividly, erupted) among Jewish believers, whose traditional religious scruples would seem to have made this development unexpected and even improbable.

In a number of publications over the past couple of decades, I have emphasized how remarkable this is, especially in light of the second-temple Jewish emphasis on the “one God,” and the accompanying stance against offering worship to any other being.\(^\text{20}\) As I emphasized in my 1988 book, second-temple Jewish tradition was able to accommodate various beings, including what I referred to as “chief agent” figures, in describing how God exercised sovereignty and would execute eschatological redemption. But none of these figures was treated as legitimate recipient of worship or accorded the sort programmatic place that Jesus quickly came to have in the devotional life of earliest Christianity.\(^\text{21}\)

The historical question, therefore, is what could have generated this development. More specifically, what might have prompted Jewish Jesus-followers who seem previously to have shared the ancient Jewish stance against worship of figures other than the biblical deity to embrace so readily this novel “dyadic” devotional pattern, in which Jesus was accorded the sort of place that seems otherwise firmly reserved for the one God? I cannot see that they would have done this easily, whether from sentiment or as some sort of experiment. Instead, they must have felt \textit{obliged} to incorporate Jesus as recipient of the devotion that quickly

\(^{18}\) In some earlier publications I referred to a “binitarian” devotional pattern, but, to avoid any implication of reading back into earliest Christian circles/texts the philosophical categories of later Christian theologizing, I have adopted the term “dyadic”, intended here simply to indicate the distinctive linkage of God and Jesus in earliest Christian devotion.

\(^{19}\) This was noted many decades ago, e.g., Adolf Deissmann, \textit{Light From the Ancient East}, trans. L. R. M. Strachan (1927; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), 382 (n. 2): “Paul did not create the cult of Christ; he took it over from the Primitive Church.” Cf. Wilhelm Bousset, \textit{Kyrios Christos} (ET; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970; from the German 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. 1921), who places the origins of the “Kyrios-cult” in “The Gentile Christianity Primitive Community” (119-52), through which it was mediated to Paul.

\(^{20}\) For discussion of ancient Jewish concerns about “one God,” see, e.g., Larry W. Hurtado, “First Century Jewish Monotheism,” \textit{JSNT }71 (1998): 3-26, republished in Hurtado, \textit{How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?}, 111-33; and, more recently, \textit{id.}, “‘Ancient Jewish Monotheism’ in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” forthcoming in \textit{JAJ}.

\(^{21}\) Hurtado, \textit{One God, One Lord}, esp. 17-92.
marked them. That is, they must have come to feel strongly that God now required this, and that failure to respond would be *disobedience to God*. Perhaps the most explicit statement of this conviction (but not the earliest indication of it) is in John 5:22-23, which proclaims the intention of “the Father” that “all should honor [ινα τιμωσι] the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.” So, to sharpen the question still further, how might these early circles of Jewish believers have come to this conviction, which involves “christological” ideas of Jesus’ status, but is also fundamentally about what God has done and requires?

Revelatory Experiences and Jesus-Devotion

I contend that the most reasonable answer to this question requires us to include as a major factor powerful religious experiences that conveyed the specific conviction to early circles of believers that it was proper, even necessary to treat the risen Jesus as rightful recipient of their devotion. Of course, the authors of our earliest Christian texts were more intent on other matters than preserving for our historical interests a record of how they came to reverence Jesus. Nevertheless, I think that we have some indications, and in what follows I will suggest some specifics of the religious experiences in question and how they served to generate the conviction that was expressed in the devotional practice of earliest Christian circles.

Visions

In chronological terms, it is likely that among the earliest of these revelatory experiences were encounters or appearances of the “risen” Jesus, by all accounts very soon after Jesus’ execution. The reports do not, however, reflect the sort of experiences that grieving people sometimes have, e.g., a sense of a deceased loved one or friend still “there” in some vague and undefined sense, or even “sightings” or auditions of the spirit/ghost of a deceased person giving assurances and comfort from a realm “beyond”. The variations among the resurrection-appearance narratives in the Gospels probably reflect adaptations and elaborations of these accounts arising from a prior tradition-history and the authorial purposes of the Evangelists, making it unwise to base too much on the details. But the main emphases shared by these narratives are that these were experiences taken as resulting from a new and remarkable act of God, specifically the eschatological resurrection of the embodied Jesus, and also entailing a commissioning of the recipients to serve as witnesses of this divine act.22

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In an epistle written a couple of decades earlier than the Gospel narratives, there is Paul’s list of those who experienced the risen Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:1-11), a text which is all the more important for historical purposes because Paul says that he recites here tradition that he in turn had received from predecessor-believers, i.e., likely from circles of Jewish believers in Roman Judea.  

I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and 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 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, . . . Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor. 15:3-8)  

Except for Paul, the others all seem to be associated with the Jerusalem church, which takes us back to the earliest stage of what became Christianity. Although his report here is brief, these early appearances of Jesus seem to have been such as to generate the strong conviction that he had been raised from death by God, and, thus, singled out uniquely to receive the resurrection-life now that some circles of second-temple Jews held out as the future divine vindication awaited by those who were faithful to God. Also, of course, as indicated in this same passage, this conviction that God had vindicated Jesus uniquely in this manner in turn meant that Jesus held a special status with God, and likely also triggered the retroactive understanding that Jesus’ cruel death had not been simply a miscarriage of justice or even simply a gallant martyrdom, but was part of the divine redemptive plan: “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures” (v. 3).  

Paul includes himself last in the list of those to whom the risen Jesus appeared in this special manner (vv. 7-8), an experience that he likewise refers to very briefly earlier in 1 Corinthians: “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (9:1). In both of these texts in 1 Corinthians Paul likely refers to what is now known as his “Damascus Road” experience, which he also points to in Galatians 1:15-16, describing it there, as noted already,  

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24 One of the classic expressions of the hope of eschatological resurrection of the righteous is in Dan 12:1-3.  
25 Daniel Kendall and Gerald O’Collins, “The Uniqueness of the Easter Appearances,” CBQ 54 (1992): 287-307, underscore that the NT reports distinguish these experiences from subsequent visionary experiences of Jesus.
as God’s revelation of “his Son” to him.\(^{26}\) Further, Paul’s statement in his epistle to the Philippians about his forsaking his previous reliance on Torah-observance in favour of “the surpassing worth of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philip. 3:8), and his reference there to being “apprehended/taken hold of [κατελημφθην] by Christ” (Philip. 3:12) may well be additional allusions to the cognitive content and powerful effect of this revelatory experience.\(^{27}\) Moreover, it seems to me that in 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:6 also, Paul’s extended treatment of the inability of fellow “sons of Israel” to recognize the glory of Christ, in contrast with the unveiled perception of his glory that accrues when “one turns to the Lord,” must draw upon his own experience, the “christophany” that turned him about from opponent to avid proponent of Jesus.\(^{28}\)

To be sure, however, although this experience was revolutionary for Paul, the unexpected “revelation” of Jesus as God’s Son and the glorious Lord exalted to God’s “right hand” was not really a disclosure of a radically new view of Jesus. Instead, I regard it most reasonable that in this christophany-experience Paul felt compelled (by God) to accept personally a high view of Jesus and a corresponding devotional stance that characterized the Jewish believers against whom he had directed his “persecution,” and that likely comprised a major factor that had prompted his opposition to them.\(^{29}\) Nevertheless, I think that we can use his references to the experience to explore the kind of experiences that were formative for the earliest circles of believers. Paul’s linkage of his own revelatory experience with that of the predecessors mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 leads me to suggest that his description of the experience may also allow us to make inferences about those other and earlier

\(^{26}\) I take \(\nu\mu \iota\) in Gal. 1:16 as designating the experience as having its impact on Paul personally.

\(^{27}\) On Philip. 3:12, see, e.g., Gordon D. Fee, Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 346 (n. 32), and on the larger matter of Paul’s christophany-experience, Johannes Munck, Paul and the Salvation of Mankind (London: SCM, 1959), 11-35, remains important.

\(^{28}\) On Paul’s statement in 2 Cor. 3:16 about the veil being removed “whenever one turns to the Lord,” Barrett commented, “as Paul knew, since God had revealed his Son to him” (Second Epistle to the Corinthians, 122).

\(^{29}\) So also Martin Hengel, Studies in Early Christology (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 172-75, esp. 174: “That Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah-Son of Man, who was hanged on the tree of shame and was resurrected by God, was exalted to the right hand of his heavenly father and is participant in his divine power, was a claim of fanatic boldness; it was intellectual dynamite which could sound like blasphemy in the ears of Jewish listeners. The indignation of the hierarchy in Jerusalem as also the determination of the young Pharisaic Saul to oppose the enthusiastic proclaimers of this new – one almost wants to say: monstrous – message appears thus in an understandable light.” I think it likely that Paul’s statement that Jesus became “a curse/accursed for us” and the accompanying citation, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (from Deut. 21:23) is an adaptation of a view of Jesus as an accursed figure that Paul held prior to his “christophany” experience, as contended, e.g., by Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn, “Jesus als Gekreuzigter in der frühchristlichen Verkündigung bis zur Mitte des 2. Jahrhunderts,” ZTK 72 (1975): 1-46, esp. 21, 35-36; Max Wilcox, “‘Upon the Tree’– Deut 21:22-23 in the New Testament,” JBL 96 (1977): 85-99.
revelatory experiences as well. I will return to this shortly, after we consider a feature of the cognitive content of Paul’s experience that does seem to have been distinctive.

Whether in this same experience or subsequently, there was another major revelatory component that combined with the christophanic import of his experience to generate a significant innovation that had impact for many others in addition to Paul. This additional factor was what he took as a personal divine commission to proclaim Jesus to the nations/gentiles (Gal. 1:16). Indeed, in Galatians 1:15 he refers to having been designated (“set apart”) by God from before his birth for this task (phrasing that echoes the divine oracle addressing the “servant” figure in Isaiah 49:1-6). Paul was not alone, nor was he likely the first, in proclaiming the gospel to gentiles. But it is clear that he felt driven by a particular, even unique calling by God to conduct a programmatic effort to “bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his [Jesus’] name” (Rom. 1:5).

Moreover, Paul was convinced that the terms of this divine commission involved gentiles being enfranchised “in Christ” as gentiles. That is, against some other Jewish believers who held that gentiles should “Judaize”, i.e., take up Torah-observance to complete their conversion, Paul insisted (on the basis of what he took as divine revelation) that the former pagans who made up his congregations must not do so, for it would in effect be to treat Christ as insufficient for their salvation, thereby going against God, who had made Christ the final means of redemption. This fervent conviction about the terms on which former pagans were to be received as full co-religionists, and the determined efforts that Paul took on the basis of it surely produced another remarkable innovation: the programmatic inclusion of gentiles as fully accepted members of the redeemed people of the God of Israel, which obviously in due course became the dominant view.

But, as fascinating and important historically as this innovation is, I wish to return to my focus on the still more remarkable innovation comprised in the emergence of cultic devotion to Jesus. I mentioned earlier that Paul’s references to his own christophany might allow inferences about the kind of revelatory experience that first generated this devotional practice. The cognitive content and effects are perhaps more readily indicated. Importantly,

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30 Munck (Paul and the Salvation of Mankind, 24-26), noted the echoes of OT prophetic-call oracles and judged that Paul thought this his own divine calling was “the same as it was in the case of Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah, a renewal of God’s will for the salvation of the Gentiles, giving him a place in the history of salvation in line with those Old Testament figures” (26).
31 Paula Fredricksen has pointed to biblical/Jewish texts that predict the nations forsaking their gods/idols and turning to the God of Israel, but not having to become Jews, e.g., Isa. 60:1-16; Tobit 14:6-7, proposing that Paul could have become convinced in his “revelation” experiences that he was called to precipitate the fulfilment of these prophecies.
Paul refers to his experience as an act of God: God revealed “his Son” to Paul (Gal. 1:16). Moreover, as we noted earlier, all other reports of the early and influential encounters with the risen Jesus treat him as raised from death by God. That is, in their experience, Jesus did not survive death or continue to relate to them in death through some inherent power of his own, but, instead, he was given eschatological resurrection by God. This means that, however unpredicated and perhaps even unsettling these initial experiences may have been to recipients, in some ways their understanding of what the experiences meant fitted within certain features of their prior religious outlook. They understood the agency at work to be the one biblical deity, not some other power, and, as we have already observed, the nature of God’s act was a vindication of Jesus by means of personal resurrection, the very form of eschatological vindication that was the hope of many devout Jews of that time.32 The novelty was that Jesus had been singled out for this vindication ahead of the time of general resurrection, which signalled some remarkably special significance given to him by God.

Moreover, if, as I have proposed earlier, it is proper to see in 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:6 some allusions to Paul’s christophany, then we may make some further inferences.33 Paul’s refers in this passage to having a “veil” taken away from one’s mind/heart (by God), the scriptures (“Moses”), thus, understood in a new way, believers, thereby, “with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord” (3:16-18).34 This all certainly sounds similar to his reference to his own experience as a divine “revelation” (Gal. 1:16) that communicated Jesus’ status as God’s “Son”, and I note also Paul’s reference in Philippians 3:21 to Jesus’ “glorious body”, the form of which believers are to share in the consummation.

That is, Paul’s experience likely conveyed to him (or led thereafter to) a powerful sense that Jesus (whom he had probably regarded previously as an accursed false prophet) had been raised by God from death and, indeed, given divine glory. To reiterate a point proposed earlier, if, as he implies in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, his experience was essentially similar to that of the others he lists, then we may surmise that the earliest experiences of the risen Jesus likewise generated these (or similar) convictions. That is, as likely the case with

34 With others, I take καθορισμένου as meaning “ beholding” rather than “reflecting.” But, either way, a vision of the Lord is what is mentioned.
Paul, these experiences involved a strong visual component, recipients seeing Jesus’ glorious status conveyed in terms of divine glory manifested in biblical theophanies.

Other NT texts may further assist us in framing notions of the kinds of experiences that generated and shaped early Jesus-devotion. There is the interesting portrayal of the martyr Stephen’s vision of “the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). Although, of course, the narrative itself is the product of the author of Luke-Acts, and it is not easy to determine how much the account is shaped by report and/or how much by the author’s imagination, nevertheless, I suggest that the passage can serve to illustrate matters for us, giving us indirect evidence to consider.

Even if freely composed by the author, the narrative is likely intended to be accepted as fully credible by his intended Christian readers. So it is reasonable to think that he depicted the sort of experience that readers would recognize, perhaps from reports of others. In this case, we have a vision in which Jesus is seen exalted to a unique status with/before God. I suggest that the account reflects one type of early revelatory experience, visions of the exalted Jesus in heavenly glory. Indeed, this sort of vision may have been the principal factor in generating the idea that Jesus had been exalted.

To turn to another text, the author of Revelation (“John”) purports to give a first-hand report of his own visionary experiences. In Revelation 1:9-16, John relates a vision of Jesus, who is here depicted as embodied in human form (“one like a son of man,” v. 13) but also bearing several features drawn from biblical/Jewish theophanic traditions and intended to signal his glorious status and significance: his head/hair white as white wool, white as snow, his eyes like a flame of fire, his feet like burnished bronze, a voice “like the sound of many waters, . . . his face like the sun shining in full force” (vv. 14-16).

In Revelation 4–5 we have a still more astonishing account. The author relates here a two-scene vision of heavenly worship, which culminates in the joint worship given in 5:9-14 “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb” (v. 13), i.e., to God and to Christ. Once again, it is difficult to determine the relationship between the literary product and any actual vision-experience of the author, but that is not crucial for my purpose here. Given the indications that the author sought to contest prophetic claims of certain other figures and to exert influence in the churches addressed, it is likely that his visionary narrative was intended as one that would be not be readily questioned but would be treated as credible. Moreover,

this author reflects a strongly conservative attitude (e.g., his condemnation of what he regards as unacceptably liberalizing views of “Jezebel”, “Balaam” and the “Nicolaitans”). So, the sort of experience that he relates, and the cognitive import of it as well, are likely indicative of prior Christian tradition. That is, although probably written sometime toward the end of the first century CE, Revelation likely reflects here the sort of revelatory experiences (in general form and content) that were reported much earlier.

Of course, by the time of the writing of Revelation, the dyadic devotional pattern that I am focusing on here had been in practice in early Christian circles for several decades. So the vision of heavenly worship given to God and the Lamb jointly would not have been novel or revolutionary at that point for the intended readers. But the inclusion of Jesus with God as rightful recipient of worship would have been novel when first practiced in early circles of Jewish believers, and likely required a powerful prompting. Although the specific details (e.g., picturing Jesus as “the Lamb”, the twenty-four “elders”, the seven-sealed book) likely derive from this author, I suggest that the basic type of vision related here was one of the types of revelatory experiences in earliest days of the “post-Easter” period. Such visions of Jesus in heavenly glory and receiving heavenly worship would likely have generated the assured conviction that believers on earth should follow suit. That is, on the logic that earthly worship was to emulate heavenly worship, the practical implications of such visions would have been obvious for those who treated the experiences as valid.

“Charismatic Exegesis”

We noted that in his recitation of early tradition about Jesus’ death and resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 Paul twice refers to these events as “according to the scriptures” (vv. 3-4). Paul does not here identify specific scriptural texts, but NT scholarship has collectively demonstrated how rich and pervasive the evidence is that biblical (OT) texts were mined fervently, cited frequently, and interpreted creatively in earliest circles of believers as they sought understand and express what they took to be God’s salvific and revelatory actions. 37 Certain biblical texts appear to have been particularly crucial, such as Psalm 110 (LXX 109), especially the opening statement of the Psalm:

The Lord said to my lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. (v. 1)

Indeed, in addition to the several identifiable citations of Psalm 110 in the NT, it is commonly thought that “all of the statements that speak of a sitting or being of the exalted Christ ‘at the right hand of God’ are directly or indirectly dependent upon Ps. 110:1.”

We know that this Psalm was taken as a reference to Jesus’ exaltation to the unique status “at the right hand” of God (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:25; Acts 2:34-36; Mark 12:36; Matt. 22:44, et al.), which, so far as extant evidence indicates represents a daring, perhaps even a novel, interpretation of the text. Moreover, the NT evidence indicates that this interpretation/use of Psalm 110 must have commenced very early, so early that Paul presupposes an acquaintance with it in his letters to believers in Corinth and Rome written in the mid-50s CE.

As Hengel judged, this Psalm “must have jumped out and helped Christians not only to interpret and thus to proclaim the phenomenon of the appearances of Jesus, the crucified Messiah, but also just to understand it.”

Noting the early and various “patterns of interpretation” of Psalm 110 reflected in early Christian texts, Hay felt “inclined to posit a kind of fission process producing bursts of exegetical energy in many directions.”

Adopting the term from David Aune, I have referred to “charismatic exegesis” of biblical texts in earliest Christian circles as one of the types of revelatory experiences that prompted and shaped the dyadic devotional pattern that erupted so early and forcefully among them. I intend the term to capture experiences in which, as they searched their scriptures and prayerfully pondered them, believers experienced sudden new bursts of insight in various texts, helping them to understand further and confirming for them the events of Jesus’ crucifixion and their experiences of him as resurrected and exalted.

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39 For a review of pre-Christian uses of Psalm 110, see Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 19-33; Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology*, 175-84. Hengel (203) refers to “this unspeakably audacious and at the same time provocative step” in identifying Jesus as the “lord” enthroned as the companion of God in Psa. 110:1.

40 Hay (*Glory at the Right Hand*, 157) notes that early Christian use of Psalm 110 commenced well before these epistles, “probably in the pre-Pauline period, possibly . . . in the pre-Easter period,” and “was widely known in early Christian circles.”


I have further proposed that these bursts of exegetical insight likely happened typically in the settings of corporate worship and prayer. In these settings, in which the expectation of divine revelations was likely strong, exegetical insights may have come with a kind of prophetic inspiration. Paul refers, almost casually, to the corporate worship as a setting in which believers were inspired variously with “a hymn, a lesson [διδαχην], a revelation [αποκαλυψην], a tongue, or an interpretation” (1 Cor. 14:26), which suggests such a social circumstance in which fresh and inspiring things could be revealed. We may also get a sense of the social process by which prophetic “revelations” could become accepted and influential in his direction, “let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh [διακρινετωσαν] what is said” (14:29). Individuals might deliver a prophetic oracle or inspired interpretation of a biblical text, and the “others” (whether other prophets or the circle of believers) would weigh its merits. If these “others” found the revelation valid and persuasive, then it added to their understanding of things and could help to shape and confirm their confession and devotional practice.44

Another remarkable instance of early and creative interpretation of a biblical text is given in Philippians 2:9-11, the climax of a passage that is widely regarded as reflecting the wording of the earliest extant Christian hymn (Philippians 2:6-11).45 It is also widely accepted that in these verses we see a creative appropriation of Isaiah 45:23 to declare a future obeisance to be given to Jesus by all spheres of creation. The Isaiah passage is one of the most strident assertions of the uniqueness of the biblical God in the entire Hebrew Bible. I cite excerpts translated from the Greek version:

Turn to me and be saved . . . I am God, and there is no other . . . . To me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess to God saying righteousness and

44 The novel readings of biblical texts reflected in the Qumran community writings (esp. the Pesharim) are thought, likewise, to have developed through experiences of what the recipient(s) took as divine inspiration/revelation, as argued particularly by Otto Betz, Offenbarung und Schriftforschung in der Qumransekte, WUNT 6 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960). The collection of odes/psalms known as Hodayoth (or some of them) are thought by some scholars to derive from the revelatory experiences of a figure referred to as “the Teacher of Righteousness,” a figure thought by some scholars to have been influential in shaping the Qumran sect. The key text often cited as referring to the Teacher is CD 1:3-11. The most recent analysis of the Hodayoth is by Angela Kim Harkins, Reading with an “I” to the Heavens: Looking at the Qumran Hodayoth Through the Lens of Visionary Tradition (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), who proposes that the odes both reflect mystical experience and were read as part of the preparation for such experiences in the Qumran sect. But, drawing on postmodern literary theory, Maxine Grossman urges caution in using Qumran texts as evidence for historical conclusions: “Roland Barthes and the Teacher of Righteousness: The Death of the Author of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls, eds. Timothy H. Lim and John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 709-22.

glory shall be brought to him . . . from the Lord [απὸ κυρίου] all the seed of the sons of Israel shall be vindicated, and in God [ἐν Θεῷ] they shall be glorified.

The astonishing exegetical move reflected in Philippians 2:9-11 was to see in this “monotheistic” passage the prediction of a universal obeisance give to two figures, “the Lord” and “God,” the variation between the first-person pronoun phrase, “to me”, and the third-person reference to “God” likely read in a novel way by some early believer (or circle), with Jesus understood as the “Lord” who will be given obeisance along with “God”. In light of experiences of the exalted Jesus, Jesus perceived as being given to share in God’s glory and perhaps as sharing the divine throne, this Isaiah text suddenly leapt out to these early believers, confirming and clarifying the dyadic shape of the divine purpose portrayed in the text, and prompting and/or reinforcing the dyadic devotional pattern in which Jesus featured along with God.

This sort of exegetical move was not produced by scribal techniques or in settings of scholarly debate. Instead, it reflects some inspired insight that likely came suddenly and as a revelation. It appears that this in turn inspired some unknown early believer to compose the ode that Paul is commonly thought to have incorporated into his epistle to the Philippians. In such a process, we may have more than one revelatory experience that shaped to earliest Christian belief and devotional practice, contributing to the apparently novel innovation that these developments comprised.

**Conclusion**

In this discussion, I hope to have given plausible reasons for my main thesis, which is that “revelatory” experiences were a significant factor that helped to generate and shape the dyadic devotional pattern that quickly characterized circles of earliest Christians. To be sure, we should allow for multiple “forces and factors”; but among them we should recognize “revelatory” experiences as particularly important. This does not involve some special claim about the origins of Christianity, for numerous religious movements have been shown to have stemmed from such experiences of founders and/or founding circles. Certainly, the specific content of the revelatory experiences of earliest Christians was distinctive, involving

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46 I am pleased to note the supporting judgement in this matter in a review of scholarly work on the emergence of “high christology” by Andrew Chester, Andrew Chester, “High Christology—Whence, When and Why?,” *Early Christianity* 2 (2011): 22-50, esp. 47-49, who also cites a number of other scholars who likewise grant the significance of early experiences of the sort that I label “revelatory”.

47 I propose at least four major “forces and factors” in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 27-78.
astonishing claims about Jesus, and generating novel innovations in their devotional practices. *Assessing* the content of their experiences is a theological task. But granting that such experiences featured in earliest Christian circles, and that these experiences were a significant factor in producing devotion to Jesus is a historical claim that I have addressed here in historical terms.

Granted, the formal features of these experiences were shaped by the religious culture and tradition in which they took place, biblical accounts of theophanies likely influential. The experiences in question probably involved visions of the resurrected and glorified Jesus, prophetic oracles declaring God’s favour upon him and perhaps calling for cultic veneration of him, and the “charismatic exegesis” of biblical texts generating novel readings of them that helped to promote Jesus-devotion and helped to confirm its legitimacy for early believers.