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# RESURRECTION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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## VISIONARY EXPERIENCE AND THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY

Early Christianity was born from visionary experience<sup>1</sup>. This is a view which is still held among both Christian and agnostic scholars<sup>2</sup>. It has become very widespread among German theologians, thanks to the influence of R. Bultmann, who wrote that “das grundlegende Ereignis” behind the emergence of the first Christian community was that, as 1 Cor 15,5 records, “Peter was the first to look on the risen Christ”<sup>3</sup>. Of course Bultmann admitted that the visionary experiences of Peter and the other disciples were not signals from outside human reality (“Anstöße ab extra”, the expression is used by I. Broer<sup>4</sup>). More recently É. Trocmé in his history of Christianity in the first century again argued that the Christian movement was set in motion by appearances of Jesus after his death. These appearances were neither cosmic signs nor public events, but private phenomena, reserved to the disciples. Trocmé goes on to say “Yet there is no doubt whatever that these christophanies form the origin of the faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and of the disciples’ activity in spreading this conviction. The best proof of this is the very old creed cited by Paul in 1 Cor 15,3-7”<sup>5</sup>.

Were visionary experiences really the basis and cause of faith in Jesus’ resurrection, and thus the impulse behind the emergence of Christianity?

1. This contribution is a revision of my *Visionaire ervaring en de historische oorsprong van het christendom*, Leiden, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1992.

2. See, e.g., R. LANE FOX, *Pagans and Christians*, London/Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986, 1988, p. 379 “Early Christianity was also born from visionary experience ..”.

3. R. BULTMANN, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1965, pp. 47-48. See also W. MARXSEN, *Die Auferstehung Jesu als historisches und als theologisches Problem*, in W. MARXSEN – U. WILCKENS – G. DELLING – H.G. GEYER (eds.), *Die Bedeutung der Auferstehungsbotschaft für den Glauben an Jesus Christus*, Gütersloh, Mohn, 1968, pp. 9-39, esp. 26. “Zusammenfassend lässt sich also sagen: Auf Grund des Sehens gab es sowohl die Gemeinde .. als auch ihre Leitung durch Petrus...”; and, in the same volume, U. WILCKENS, *Die Überlieferungsgeschichte der Auferstehung Jesu*, pp. 41-63, esp. 50: “Jedenfalls [1 Kor 15] V. 5 sagt ein Ereignis aus, dass nach allem, was wir wissen, die nachosterliche Konstituierung der Urgemeinde zur Folge gehabt hat”.

4. I. BROER, “Seid stets bereit, jedem Rede und Antwort zu stehen, der nach der Hoffnung fragt, die euch erfüllt” (1 Petr 3,15)”, in I. BROER – J. WERBICK (eds.), “*Der Herr ist wahrhaft auferstanden*” (Lk 24,34) *Biblische und systematische Beiträge zur Entstehung des Osterglaubens* (SBS, 134), Stuttgart, Katholisches Bibelwerk, pp. 29-61, esp. 58.

5. É. TROCME, *L'enfance du christianisme*, Paris, Noësis, 1997, p. 38.

Let us begin by looking more closely at the oldest available information. We find it in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthian Christians. Paul wrote this letter in Ephesus in circa 55 A.D., about five years after he himself had founded a Christian community in Corinth. In the fifteenth chapter Paul disputes a view which some of the members of the community at Corinth had voiced after his departure. The contents of the view against which Paul argued can no longer be determined precisely, but in any case it entailed rejection of the idea that there would be a resurrection of the dead in the near future, just before the end of the present era and the coming of the new, a view widely held in many Jewish circles and by most Christians. The view that Paul challenged has been understood by some to mean that his opponents in Corinth held that their eschatological salvation, as believers, was already realised in the present; and that they therefore rejected the idea of an eschatological resurrection which was yet to come. The Corinthians' denial of a future resurrection has been interpreted by others as the expression of their scepticism with regard to any life after death at all<sup>6</sup>. It seems more accurate to me to follow the argument of still other exegetes who feel that Paul's Corinthian opponents derived their view from their inability to break free from the widespread pagan dualistic way of thinking of body and soul, with which a strong depreciation of the body was associated. They regarded themselves as being filled with Spirit and Wisdom, but held the body in little esteem. For that reason they rejected the idea of the future bodily resurrection of the dead and with it the idea of a future resurrection of the dead as a whole<sup>7</sup>.

Now Paul uses various arguments to disprove the view that there would not be a physical resurrection in the future. The most important is that, according to the unanimous preaching of all the apostles, the resurrection of one of the dead was already a fact, namely that of Christ himself. Not that the resurrection of Christ, for Paul, had value only as an historical analogy that made the future resurrection of the dead plausible. There was more involved. Christ resurrected and exalted to heaven, in Paul's view, would draw the other dead after him from death. For

6. This view has recently been defended as the most plausible one by J.S. VOS, *Argumentation und Situation in I Kor 15*, in *NT 41* (1999) 313-333.

7. Thus, among others, R.A. HORSLEY, "How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" *Spiritual Elitism in Corinth*, in *NT 20* (1978) 203-231, and J. HOLLEMAN, *Resurrection and Parousia: A Traditio-Historical Study of Paul's Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15* (NTSupp, 84), Leiden, Brill, 1996, pp. 35-40. For a survey of the discussion of the various interpretations of the Corinthian position, see D.W. KUCK, *Judgment and Community Conflict* (NTSupp, 66), Leiden, Brill, 1992, pp. 16-31, and VOS, *Argumentation* (n. 6), pp. 313-314.

according to Paul Christ had risen from the dead “as the first of the dead” (15,20)<sup>8</sup>. Paul thus regarded that first resurrection as the beginning of the eschatological resurrection. “Through and in” Christ the other dead would shortly arise (15,21-22). Paul assumes a bond between Christ and the dead believers<sup>9</sup>. For the believers are the members of Christ’s body (12,12-27). Therefore the resurrection of the one must necessarily entail the resurrection of the others. This is the background to the polemic that forms the context in which Paul refers to the appearances of the risen Christ.

Of course Paul’s argument can only have been decisive if the Corinthians accepted the premise that Jesus had risen. The apostle therefore began by reminding the Corinthians that they had accepted the preaching of Christ’s resurrection at the time, five years earlier, when Paul was active among them (15,1-3). Paul now repeats the message he had given them then, and points out that he too owed this information to the tradition of the church. What he had passed on, says Paul, was

- (3b) that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures;
- (4a) that he was buried;
- (4b) that he has risen<sup>10</sup> on the third day according to the Scriptures;
- (5a) and that he appeared to Cephas;
- (5b) and afterwards to the Twelve.
- (6a) Then he appeared to over five hundred of our brothers at once,
- (6b) most of whom are still alive, though some have died.
- (7) Then he appeared to James,
- and afterwards to all the apostles.
- (8) In the end he appeared even to me.

How much of this information did Paul derive from earlier tradition<sup>11</sup>? Naturally, not the closing words about the appearance to Paul himself (15,8); nor the remark “most of whom are still alive, though some have died” (15,6b). This last remark, which seeks to represent the

8 HOLLEMAN, *Resurrection* (n 7), pp 165-187

9. D G. POWERS, *Salvation through Participation An Examination of the Notion of the Believers’ Corporate Unity with Christ in Early Christian Soteriology*, Leuven, Peeters, 2001, pp 143-166, on 1 Cor 15, see pp. 152-155

10 Not “was raised”. Paul’s use of the perfect (ἐγήγερται) in lieu of the aorist is intentional: in 1 Cor 15 the lasting and definitive character of Jesus’ resurrection life is theologically important and of relevance to Paul’s argument. This does not imply, however, that Paul uses the middle voice here in a passive sense. The meaning of the perfect is intransitive, see BDR §342 1 c “Er ist auferstanden”

11 For discussions of this question, see *inter alios* B SPORLEIN, *Die Leugnung der Auferstehung* (BU, 7), Regensburg, Pustet, 1971, pp. 39-50; P HOFFMANN, *Auferstehung Jesu Christi* II/1, in *TRE* 4 (1979) 478-513, esp p 419, and further literature mentioned there

appearances of Christ as verifiable, belongs typically with Paul's argument in 1 Cor 15, but the rest must have been known to Paul from tradition, although not a tradition whose form was already fixed. Paul must have known of the matter from tradition handed down by others. Partly because it is matter which we also know from sources independent of Paul (most of 15,3-5a); partly because the contents are of such a nature that the information *could* only have come from others than Paul (15,5b-7), unless Paul was making something up in 55 or 50, which is improbable in view of the chance, however slight, of verification.

The whole passage about Jesus' death up to and including the fifth appearance named (15,3-7, excluding 15,6b), can therefore be regarded, in its content, as information drawn from tradition. But that does not mean that Paul had taken over all the substance en bloc at one time. There are good grounds for two assumptions: first, that Paul only learned the portion about Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and first appearance (15,3b-5a) as a single connected whole, namely in the form in which he wrote it down; secondly, that Paul knew the reports of all the other appearances from hearsay, that is from tradition, in which they were related as separate incidents in various combinations, but that Paul only combined them in 1 Cor 15, gave them form and added them to the account of the appearance to Cephas.

We shall deal first with the assumption that the report of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and appearance to Peter (15,3b-5a) existed in a fixed form at some time before 50, separate from the reports of other appearances. We have the following reasons to accept this: (a) only for the first part of this tradition referred to by Paul does he claim (15,3b-5a) that he had previously passed it on, as we see from the conjunctions "(3b) that...; (4a) that...; (4b) that...; (5a) and that...". Grammatically the clauses introduced by these conjunctions are dependent on the previous "I handed on to you what had been imparted to me" (15,3a). After the fourth "that" (with the report of the appearance to Cephas) Paul changes from subordinate clauses to main clauses and leaves the syntactical structure that belongs with his words "I handed on to you what had been imparted to me..."<sup>12</sup>; (b) only the two compound sentences about Jesus' death and burial on the one hand, and his resurrection and appearance to Cephas on the other (15,3b-5a), show such a strictly parallel structure that one can see in them material fixed in content and handed down in

12. For the view that 15,3b-5a form a piece of very early tradition, while 15,6-7 represent further traditions that Paul add at the end to fill out his personal concerns, see, e.g., G.D. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 722.

fixed form<sup>13</sup>; (c) suppose the appearances to the Twelve, the five hundred, James and all the apostles had been mentioned from the beginning with Jesus' death, resurrection and appearance to Cephas/Peter; then the appearances would have had such weight and commanded such attention compared to Jesus' death and resurrection, that it is unclear in which context this summary could have functioned in the communal life of the earliest Christians. The place that such a tradition must have had in the life and functioning of the community is unimaginable. A tradition consisting of the whole summary from Jesus' death up to and including the appearance to all the apostles (15,3b-7) cannot therefore be regarded as having existed as an independent whole<sup>14</sup>.

We now turn to the assumption that it was not until 1 Cor 15 that Paul combined the reports of appearances to others than Peter and linked them to the statement of the christophany to Peter. This is probable, not only because the summary of appearances does not play a meaningful role until the polemical chapter 15 of this letter – i.e., as a welcome proof of the reality of Jesus' resurrection – but also because there is nothing whatever to indicate that the summary offered by Paul in 1 Cor 15 (vv. 5b-8) had been handed down by him, or by others close to him, on other occasions, as a list in more or less fixed form. The reports of Christ's appearances after that to Peter must have been very little later in date than that of the appearance to Peter as far as their contents went. But they were, of course, of different origins and dates<sup>15</sup>. Only in 1 Cor 15 did Paul combine them and add them to the report of the appearance to Peter. Here Paul used the traditional turn of phrase "he appeared to", which was already known to him from the christophany to Peter, as his

13. The question is debated whether 15,5b "and afterwards to the Twelve" is a very early addition to the tradition quoted in 15,3b-5a, or the beginning of Paul's expansion on its final line. According to A. LINDEMANN, e.g., 15,5b was "vermutlich eine den Korinthern bereits bekannte Erweiterung der ursprünglichen Formel"; see his *Der Erste Korintherbrief* (HNT, 9/1), Tübingen, Mohr (Siebeck), 2000, p. 332. See also SPORLEIN, *Leugnung* (n. 11), pp. 39-50; HOFFMANN, *Auferstehung* (n. 11), p. 491. In any case 15,5b cannot be considered as old as 15,3b-5a, since the report of the appearance to the Twelve is best understood as having originated in competition with that concerning Peter. Since 15,6-7 are Paul's composition anyhow, the least complicated supposition is that v. 5b was included by Paul along with 15,6-7.

14. SPORLEIN, *Leugnung* (n. 11), pp. 46-47.

15. U. WILCKENS, *Der Ursprung der Überlieferung der Erscheinungen des Auferstandenen*, in W. JOEST – W. PANNENBERG (eds.), *Dogma und Denkstrukturen*. FS E. Schlück, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963, pp. 56-95; reprinted in P. HOFFMANN (ed.), *Zwei neutestamentlichen Überlieferung von der Auferstehung Jesu* (Wege der Forschung, 522), Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988, pp. 139-193, esp. 163.

model for the format of all the christophanies which he now added to that to Peter

Let us return briefly to the passage about the death, burial, resurrection and first appearance of Jesus, that to Cephas or Peter. We have stated that this passage, in the form in which Paul wrote it down, dates from before the year 50. Can we tell from the formally fixed structure of this passage how much earlier than 50 it is? I think not. Paul dates the appearances which were granted to others, beginning with that to Peter, before that to himself, which resulted in his conversion (cf. 1 Cor 9,1, Gal 1,15). Two to three years after his conversion Paul visited Jerusalem and spoke to Peter and James, the leaders of the Christian community there (Gal 1,18-19). And it would in fact be very strange if Paul had learned of the appearance to Peter (and that to James) later than that visit. The content of the tradition about Jesus' death, resurrection and appearance to Peter which Paul passed on at Corinth around the year 50 must have gone back to the early or middle thirties. But even if Paul must have learned this information not later than 35, that does not mean that it had already assumed the fixed form which it has in 1 Cor 15 (vv. 3b-5a) and had before Paul's visit to Corinth in 50 AD. Possibly, that form had only become known to Paul between 35 and 50. The form is certainly un-Pauline. Expressions such as "according to the Scriptures" (κατὰ τὰς γραφάς) and "appeared" (ὤφθη) were certainly not part of Paul's own chosen style for they occur nowhere else in his writings outside 1 Cor 15.

Nevertheless one may accept that around the year 50 there was a fixed and connected tradition which took the form of the two-part sentence (a) that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and was buried, and (b) that he rose on the third day according to the Scriptures and appeared to Cephas (15,3b-5a)<sup>16</sup>

But even this relatively early whole can easily be shown to have undergone growth and expansion already, for it is built up around a well known and very old core, the two-part formula "he died and rose again". This is in fact a very ancient pre-Pauline formula, as appears from its widespread occurrence in evidently traditional passages in Paul and in sources independent of Paul<sup>17</sup>. Now this two-part formula, "he

16 For the two part structure of the sentence, see among others W. KRAMER, *Christos Kyrios Gottessohn* (ATANT, 44), Zurich/Stuttgart, Zwingli, pp. 15, 28, K. T. KLEIN KNECHT, *Der leitende Gerechtfertigte* (WUNT, II/13), Tübingen, Mohr (Siebeck), p. 183.

17 K. WENGST, *Christologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums* (StNT, 7), Gutersloh, Mohr, 1972, pp. 92-104. The formula occurs in slightly varying forms in 1 Thess 4,14, 2 Cor 5,15, Rom 4,25, 8,34, 14,9, with more variation in 2 Cor 13,4, 1 P 3,18, Rev 1,18, 2,8, Heb 12,2, Polycarp, *Phil* 9,2.



died and rose again”, originally did not include the formula “he appeared”. The report that he appeared to Cephas must therefore derive from another tradition than the words “he died and rose again”. Reasoning as follows, we can deduce that the added report of the appearance to Cephas was not just a casually imagined and untraditional element, but a very early and pre-Pauline tradition.

It is striking that the christophanies reported were chiefly experienced by persons who held the leading functions in the community at Jerusalem<sup>18</sup>. Now we may doubt that those who held the leadership and bore responsibility in the Jerusalem community alongside and after Peter, like the Twelve, James and all the apostles, would ever have said that Christ had appeared to them if an earlier report, i.e., an earlier tradition, of an appearance to Peter had not tempted them to do so<sup>19</sup>. This last remark is important. It permits the conclusion that there was already talk in the Jerusalem community of an appearance to Peter as early as the middle thirties<sup>20</sup>, for Paul dates the appearances, from that to Peter up to and including that to all the apostles, before the vision in which Christ appeared to him, Paul. The appearance to Paul himself, followed by his conversion, must be dated, however, with the necessary caution to circa 31 (and not later than 35) A.D. Consequently, the report of the appearance to Peter must also have been current as early as about 31 (and not later than 35). For it is unacceptable that Peter’s experience could only have been spoken of after Paul had related his own. In short, the report of the appearance to Peter was already in circulation not later than 35 A.D., and it related the oldest known appearance.

Now we have to pause to ask if that talk of an appearance to Peter or Cephas existed exclusively as a report of others about him and not a report told by Peter of himself. Ultimately we possess this report of an appearance to Peter only in the form of an assertion made by third parties about Peter and not as Peter’s claim about himself in the first person. Such a report about him could have arisen from the wish of

18. HOFFMANN, *Auferstehung* (n 11), p 491

19. WILCKENS, *Ursprung* (n 15), pp 159-162 The idea that the existence of an early tradition concerning a christophany to Peter is confirmed by Lk 24,34 (see HOFFMANN, *Auferstehung*, p 491), should be dismissed since we cannot be absolutely sure that Lk 24,34 is independent of 1 Cor 15,5

20 It is also conceivable that a christophany to someone else than Peter was related before the report of the appearance to Peter originated, and that the latter originated in competition with the former In principle, however, this possibility does not alter the situation one bit. one report of a christophany has been the first to originate and to circulate, this first report may have elicited competing reports.

sympathizers to buttress the authority of Peter as apostle and leader of the Jerusalem community. How one could disarm this suspicion I do not know: perhaps by stating that it betrays too much distrust. For now I shall avoid it and assume for the moment that Peter himself, very soon after the death of Jesus, declared that he had experienced a christophany<sup>21</sup>.

But then one also has to state that we cannot know if Peter himself spoke of his christophany in exactly the same formula "he appeared to me". In its Greek form this formula dates from before 50 but we do not know how long before. One can, however, defend the argument that the formula "he appeared to me" at least had Peter's consent, because it could hardly have been circulated without it during his lifetime (and Peter was still alive at least in circa 48, Gal 2,1-10). Peter therefore may not have been personally responsible for the formula, but it may have had his consent and may have correctly reflected his meaning. Perhaps he also made the formula his own and thus gave it his sanction.

Here one should state that there has been much debate about the question, whether the assertion that Jesus appeared to Peter/Cephas was originally phrased in Aramaic or in Greek. Jeremias argued for the former, Conzelmann, among others, for the latter<sup>22</sup>. Fundamentally the question at issue in this discussion was whether or not the alleged assertion can be traced back to the Aramaic-speaking community in Jerusalem and thus to the mouth of Peter. But the question of the original language is no longer of great importance<sup>23</sup>. In Jerusalem in the first half of the first century Aramaic was rather more widely spoken than Greek, but not very much more<sup>24</sup>. From the moment when Christians began to be present in Jerusalem, Aramaic speakers, speakers of both Aramaic and

21. For the notion that christophanies served to legitimise the authority of those to whom the appearances were said to have occurred, see, e.g., WILCKENS, *Ursprung* (n. 15), pp. 149-162; MARXSEN, *Die Auferstehung Jesu* (n. 3), pp. 87-89; R. PESCH, *Zur Entstehung des Glaubens an die Auferstehung Jesu*, in *TQ* 153 (1973) 201-228, esp. p. 213. The notion is based on, e.g., 1 Cor 9,1; 15,8-10; and Mt 28,16-20. For a discussion and critique of Pesch's article, see J. LAMBRECHT, *Het ontstaan van het geloof in Jezus' verrijzenis*, in *Onze alma mater* 32 (1978) 67-83, reprinted in *Id.*, *Daar komt toch eens ... Opstellen over verrijzenis en eeuwig leven* (Nikè-reeks, 2), Leuven, Acco, 1981, pp. 71-92.

22. For a survey of the discussion, see E.L. BODE, *The First Easter Morning* (AnBib, 45), Rome, Biblical Institute, 1970, pp. 92-94.

23. M. HENGEL, *The Atonement*, London, SCM, 1981, p. 38.

24. M. HENGEL, *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, London, SCM, 1990, pp. 9-14; P.W. VAN DER HORST, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* (CBET, 2), Kampen, Kok Pharos, 1991, pp. 23-24.

Greek, and Greek speakers lived alongside one another<sup>25</sup>. Therefore Peter's christophany must have been spoken of at first in both Aramaic and Greek. And Peter himself could have said of Jesus "he appeared to me" in either Aramaic or Greek. The language in which it was originally uttered makes no difference to its meaning.

What idea was meant to be expressed in the words "Christ appeared to me"? In answering this question one has to detach oneself for a moment from the accounts of the risen Jesus in the gospels. The idea of the resurrection of Jesus in the gospels is quite different from that which we find in Paul and the tradition behind him: for the gospels suggest that Jesus, in the body, left the tomb and returned to earth<sup>26</sup>. In my view that was not how Paul saw it, nor can it be accepted that it was the way in which it was seen by the first Christians, Peter among them, shortly after Jesus' death<sup>27</sup>. One must also leave out of consideration Luke's accounts of the appearance of the risen Christ to Paul on the road to Damascus<sup>28</sup>. These are Lucan expansions in narrative form of a few sober remarks which Paul himself makes in his letters<sup>29</sup>.

The gospels and Acts thus cannot shed any light on "he appeared" (ὤφθη) in the tradition behind 1 Cor 15,5. First of all we have to discover if any light can be shed on the meaning of ὤφθη with dative from the use of the same expression in the literature available to the Jews in the first century A.D. The most eligible works are those which we now know as the Old Testament, and especially the Septuagint.

This investigation has been undertaken repeatedly<sup>30</sup>. It has led to the conclusion that ὤφθη ("he appeared to") in the tradition behind 1 Cor

25 HENGEL, *Atonement* (n. 23), pp. 38-39; ID., *Hellenization* (n. 24), pp. 17-18.

26. This is the view of Matthew, Luke-Acts and John. Mark stands midway between the Pauline position and that of the other gospels by representing the risen Jesus as having left his tomb in his natural body (as in the other gospels) but without returning on earth. Mark's Jesus has directly been exalted from the tomb to heaven (as in Paul), from where he will appear to the disciples (Mk 16,7; cf. 14,28). Mark does not relate such an appearance, probably because he felt that the empty tomb (which he was the first to relate) was sufficient proof of Jesus' resurrection. The main reason why "you will see him" in Mk 16,7 must be taken to refer to a christophany, not to the parousia, is that those to whom this promise is directed include Peter. Writing in or shortly after 70 A.D., Mark cannot have meant the promise to refer to the parousia, since he must have known that Peter did not live to witness the parousia. See also M. D. HOOKER, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St Mark* (BNTC), London, Black, 1991, p. 386.

27. My view of how the belief in Jesus' resurrection originated fully corresponds to that of HOLLEMAN, *Resurrection* (n. 7), pp. 144-157.

28. Acts 9,3-9; 22,5-11; 26,12-18.

29. Gal 1,13-17; 1 Cor 9,1; 15,8-9

30. W. MICHAELIS, *Die Erscheinungen des Auferstandenen*, Basel, Majer, 1944, pp.104-109; ID., Art ὄραω etc., in *TWNT* 5 (1954) 315-381, esp. pp. 324-335; 358-362,

15,5 is an expression which is typically employed to indicate appearances of God or angels

The great problem, however, is that the Old Testament representations of those theophanies or angelophanies vary greatly. The material can be divided into at least six categories

(1) In some cases we are told that an anthropomorphic figure appeared materially and visibly and spoke with a human voice, sometimes at great length. For example the appearance of God to Abraham at the oak of Mamre<sup>31</sup>

(2) In other cases the phenomenon appeared visually and acoustically just as real as in the cases just mentioned, but it was a dream, the contents of which are interpreted as a theophany. An example is the appearance of God to Jacob at Bethel above the ladder between heaven and earth<sup>32</sup>. It is important that not all these cases explicitly say that a dream is referred to. Genesis three times mentions the theophany to Jacob, without saying that it took place in a dream, while the reference is evidently to Jacob's dream at Bethel<sup>33</sup>

(3) There are cases in which, according to the biblical account, the theophany certainly took place in everyday reality and was coupled with an intelligible utterance of God, but in which the visual phenomenon was not anthropomorphic but physical, such as a flame or a cloud. This is how the appearance of God to Moses in the burning bush is represented<sup>34</sup>

(4) There are cases in which God is said to have appeared but without a personal form or even a voice, but exclusively through the physical phenomenon of fire or cloud<sup>35</sup>

(5) There are references to appearances in some cases in which nothing at all could be seen, but a voice alone uttered the divine message

J LINDBLOM, *Gesichte und Offenbarungen. Vorstellungen von gottlichen Weisungen und ubernaturlichen Erscheinungen im altesten Christentum*, Lund, Gleerup, 1968, pp. 84-89, H-W BARTSCH, *Inhalt und Funktion des urchristlichen Osterglaubens*, in *NTS* 26 (1980) 180-196, J KREMER, Art. ὄραω, in *EWNT* 2 (1981) cc. 1287-1293, esp. 1291

<sup>31</sup> Gen 18,1 LXX. Furthermore, Gen 16,3 LXX, 17,1 LXX (cf. v. 22), 35,9 LXX (cf. v. 13), Judg 6,12 LXX (cf. vv. 11 and 21), 2 Macc 3,25(-30). The last passage is particularly instructive in that it shows that the person who manifested himself in such an appearance could be conceived of as a very concrete and living, ontic reality.

<sup>32</sup> Gen 31,13 LXX, Gen 35,1 LXX. Further examples occur in Gen 26,24 LXX, 48,3 LXX, 3 Kings 3,5 LXX, 9,2 LXX, 11,9 LXX, 2 Chron 7,12 LXX.

<sup>33</sup> Gen 31,13 LXX, 35,1 LXX and 48,3 LXX.

<sup>34</sup> Fire is referred to Exod 3,2 LXX and Deut 33,16 LXX. A cloud in Exod 16,10 LXX, Num 14,10 LXX, 16,19 LXX, 16,42 LXX and 20,6 LXX.

<sup>35</sup> Fire is mentioned in Lev 9,4 LXX, 6,23 LXX, and Ezekiel the Tragic Poet, *Exagoge* 235, the last passage is dependent on Ex 14,24 LXX. A cloud is mentioned in Lev 16,2 LXX.

The voice which restrained Abraham from killing Isaac is referred to in the Septuagint in the words “the Lord appeared”<sup>36</sup>

(6) Finally there are references to God’s appearances when there is no indication of any visible form or of the hearing of a voice, but that God’s power and favour were made manifest in the course of earthly affairs. A psalm says, for example, that when God has taken away the indignity from Jerusalem and freed it from its enemies, “he will appear in his glory”<sup>37</sup> This is not a suggestion of a theophany in the strict sense. The word “appear” (ὁφθῆναι) is purely metaphorical<sup>38</sup>

Now the description of the appearance to Peter in the words “he appeared to me” behind 1 Cor 15, 5 is so extremely brief that it offers us no safe grounds on which to say which of the six categories was originally intended in this instance<sup>39</sup> In principle all six are eligible and perhaps others as well. Peter may have meant that he had had a dream (2), he may have been affected by some physical phenomenon which impressed him as a christophany (4), he may have seen a special sign of Christ’s favour in some event or other, and said of it metaphorically “he appeared to me” (6), finally, in a state of abnormal consciousness, of mental dissociation, he may have had an experience of an acoustic or acoustic and visual nature, which he described in the words that tradition offered ready to hand, but which he now applied to Christ “he appeared to me”

As a historian the exegete can only sum up, perhaps not even exhaustively, the various ideas that can be associated with Peter’s statement that Christ appeared to him. But the historian can no longer choose among them and determine which one of them was precisely that meant in Peter’s case. Here the historian can deal only with possibilities and no longer with reality.

From the standpoint of comparative religion, however, we can be rather more precise. In a dream one can see a person appear but to

36 Gen 22,4 LXX. Further examples occur in Gen 12,7 LXX, 26,2 LXX.

37 Ps 101,17 LXX, 83,8 LXX. See also Isa 40,5 LXX, 60,2 LXX, 66,5 LXX, Jer 38,3 LXX (31,3 MT). All these passages describe the coming of a period of salvation, but Jer 38,3 LXX has the aorist (κύριος ὠφθῆ) instead of the future tense. Isa 60,2 LXX shows that there is no difference between the appearance of God’s glory and that of God himself.

38 Interestingly, Philo of Alexandria, *De mutatione nominum* 3,6, points out that in the Hebrew Scriptures all passages which speak of God’s appearance must be understood metaphorically. None of them means that God manifested himself in an empirically perceptible form or any physical phenomenon. They mean that people gained a clear insight into God’s properties: e.g. his kingship of the world (*ibid.*, 15,17).

39 Cf. LINDEMANN, *Der Erste Korintherbrief* (n. 13), p. 332: “Über die Art des ὠφθῆ ist nichts zu ermitteln”.

believe that an ontic reality is attached to that appearance is an interpretation. In everyday reality one can observe a physical phenomenon such as light or sound, but to call it a theophany or a christophany is an interpretation. One may see salvation in an event, but to see it metaphorically as being vouchsafed an appearance of Christ, is an interpretation<sup>40</sup>. Comparative religion is familiar with what is called the “altered state of consciousness”, a state in which consciousness is not in the normal, associative state in which one is aware of, alert to and in contact with one’s surroundings. In such a state of altered consciousness, people may have acoustic and visual experiences which they can interpret as voices, messages or appearances of a person. But this attachment of a meaning is interpretation, and culturally coded interpretation at that<sup>41</sup>. To acknowledge the ontic reality of the result of the interpretation (“It is the living Christ who manifested himself to me”) is extra interpretation.

It is impossible for the scholarly researcher to verify or falsify the accuracy of these interpretations. Here empirical scholarship simply stands at the limit of its powers, and must refrain from passing judgement. The possibility that in a use of language other than that of scholarship these interpretations may successfully claim validity and relevance remains unaffected.

On this point, however, I have to draw the conclusion with which I am concerned here. We have seen that the concept which arguably attached to the earliest occurrence of the assertion “Christ appeared to me” can no longer be recovered. We simply do not know what precisely ὁφθῆ meant when, in the (early) thirties, it was used to underpin Peter’s authority, nor what precisely it means in 1 Cor 15,4. We have also seen that the way in which that concept was put into words in the assertion that “the risen Christ appeared to me”, is an interpretation. But if it is an interpretation, it must have been *preceded* by a belief in Jesus’ resurrection. For one who says that Christ *was manifested to him* in his experience,

40 In John 12,28-30, the evangelist admits that an acoustic phenomenon which is interpreted by some as thunder, can be interpreted by others as the voice of an angel or God. Similarly, according to Acts 9,3-7, the light which flashed around Paul made him fall on the ground, but the men who were travelling with him did not even notice it. According to Acts 22,9 they did not hear the voice which Paul heard speaking to him. What is a normal situation or natural phenomenon to one person can be a heavenly sign or divine message to another.

41. Mary does not appear to Buddhists. Cf. LANE FOX, *Pagans and Christians* (n. 2), p. 376. “Visions differ according to the piety of differing groups and periods”; BRÖER, “*Seid stets bereit*” (n. 4), p. 61: “Die Rede von den Erscheinungen des Auferstandenen ist ein in einer bestimmten kulturellen Situation verankerter Ausdruck für tiefgreifende Glaubenserfahrungen” (italics mine)

has already accepted that Christ *is* a living reality. The reports of the appearances assume the occurrence of the resurrection, the reality of the renewed life of Christ<sup>42</sup>. This is just as much the case as the assumption of the reality of God which underlies the theophanies of the Old Testament. One cannot deny that reports of appearances soon acquired the function of guarantees of the reality of the resurrection of Christ, or even proofs of it. This was already the case in the traditional formula behind 1 Cor 15,3-5, and particularly clearly in the book of Acts (1,3; 13,31). It is especially the case when Jesus' resurrection and appearance are named in one and the same breath, as in all the passages just referred to. But all this does not disprove the statement that in its oldest form the report of the appearance to Peter was not to be the foundation of belief in Jesus' resurrection, but rather assumed that belief as its basis.

It is therefore incorrect, to come back to the starting point of this paper, to believe that Christianity and the church originated after the death of Jesus out of the visionary experiences of Peter or anyone else.

The great question which now arises is: from what then did the movement of those who confessed Jesus as their Lord actually emerge? Before I go into this question, two others deserve some attention.

The first is: how was it possible for a belief to take root that Jesus had risen from death and been exalted to heaven, if the impulse to believe this did not lie in what we call his appearances, or in the finding of his empty tomb?

In the religious thought of which the literature of ancient Israel is the record, an important role is often played by a belief that a righteous person who suffers in this world because he lives in faith and obedience to God, may count on rescue and rehabilitation by God<sup>43</sup>. There is a confidence that God will take the suffering righteous one to himself, bring about a turn in his miserable existence and vindicate the humiliated one vis-à-vis his persecutors. In Hellenistic times the rehabilitation by God of people who had had to pay for their obedience to him with their life was represented as meaning that God took them up to himself in heaven immediately or very soon after their death. It was confidently believed that the suffering righteous who gave up their lives for God's cause would regain life in God's heaven, not in their earthly bodies but in renewed and incorruptible heavenly bodies<sup>44</sup>. This confidence could be

42. See WILCKENS, *Der Ursprung* (n. 15), pp. 166-167: in the reports of appearances underlying 1 Cor 15,5-7 "wurde das Geschehensein der Auferweckung Jesu als solches nicht erwiesen, sondern vorausgesetzt".

43. See, e.g., KLEINKNECHT, *Der leidende Gerechtfertigte* (n. 16)

44. 2 Macc 7,9.11.14 23 29.36, 15,12-16; Wis 3,1-6; 4,7-15; Ps.-Philo, *Antiquitates Biblicae* 32,2-3; 40,4; *Testamentum Hiob* 39,12, 40,3. On the Jewish tradition of the

felt about every righteous person whose faith in God ended in death. Jesus' followers had this confidence in him, as soon as he had died. It was simply inherent in their vision of Jesus as the suffering and crucified righteous man<sup>45</sup>.

The other question which deserves attention here is this: most of the christophanies from Peter to that of Paul were closely connected, for those who received them, with their realisation that they had a mission to spread the teaching of Jesus and to win the world for their vision and preaching. How is the relationship between appearance and the consciousness of a mission to be explained? We must seek the explanation in the existence of a certain traditional view of the function of such appearances. In his appearance to Moses in the burning bush God says "Now then go, I send you" (ἀποστείλω σε, Exod 3,10). Moses agrees to go and say to his people: "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you" (ἀπέσταλκέν με, 3,14). God advises him indeed to tell his people: "The one who is has sent me" (ἀπέσταλκέν με, 3,15). Moses must tell them that God has decided to accomplish their rescue and liberation. In a theophany which Gideon experienced God says: "Go ... and deliver Israel ...; I hereby commission you" (ἐξαπέστειλά σε, Judg 6,14). From ancient times, therefore, stories of appearances served to explain the consciousness of certain persons that they had been sent by God to speak to their people and promise them a liberation to be brought about by God. The analogy with the consciousness of mission and the preaching of the early apostles is unmistakeable. They too felt bound by a duty imposed from above to tell their fellow men that liberation had been made possible for them by God, that they could count on that rescue and had to change their way of life accordingly. The link between their awareness of that mission and their reports of an appearance is culturally coded, in other words, determined by tradition. There is reason to ask whether the consciousness of a mission on the part of Jesus' followers did not contribute to their disposition to declare that Christ had appeared to them<sup>46</sup>.

We come back to the question: if the movement of Jesus' followers after his death did not emerge from visionary experiences or the finding

heavenly resurrection of the martyr, see HOLLEMAN, *Resurrection* (n. 7), pp. 144-157.

45. Neither the empty tomb, nor appearances were therefore needed for the belief in Jesus' resurrection to come into being.

46. Cf. how Paul defends his apostleship in 1 Cor 9,21: "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?".



of the empty tomb, what did it emerge from? The only possible conclusion is that the movement after Jesus' death was the continuation of that which had begun before it in response to his person, preaching and actions. The history of the church began as a response on the part of the people whom Jesus won by his preaching during his activity on earth<sup>47</sup>.

This is a conclusion reached by eliminating other options, but it appears inescapable. What is more, it can be supported on solid grounds. Here a summary sketch of the probable development must suffice.

Jesus had announced that a definitive turning point in the history of Israel and the world was at hand; God was on the point of intervening, of establishing his rule on earth and thereby putting an end to the old powers and dominions. Liberation was about to dawn for the oppressed and the downtrodden. God would offer salvation to those who would give up their wrong conduct and obey his will, but there was not much time left: his rule was already dawning. Thanks to the boldness and authority with which Jesus spoke out against the religious authorities of his day, thanks to his attention to the humble and lowly, his healing of the sick and the exorcisms which accompanied his preaching, he found a group of people willing to listen to him. They became convinced that God's rule was indeed at hand. They saw in Jesus a prophet, in fact the last and therefore the unique messenger of God before the end of history. In his words and acts they saw signs that the hoped-for transformation was about to be accomplished. Some of them also saw Jesus as the ideal king of a future new Israel, and for that reason called him "the Anointed One" (Messiah, Christ).

The conviction that the signs of God's approaching rule were already manifest was so strongly held by some of Jesus' followers that they could not abandon it when he died, for the core of their conviction lay in their belief that God was causing his rule to dawn, and not in their view of the person or role of Jesus. A proper understanding of the main point put at least some of Jesus' followers in a position to get over his death, even to interpret it as of salutary effect for others, and to hold fast to their conviction that God would soon establish his royal power on earth. These followers remained convinced that Jesus, although he had died and had since been rehabilitated by God and exalted to heaven, would still fulfil a task in the final breakthrough of God's rule. Jesus himself as well as many other Jews believed that God would bring about the end of the world by sending a judge and saviour from heaven: the Son of Man.

47. MARXSEN, *Die Auferstehung Jesu* (n. 3), p. 37: "Der Grund [der Kirche] liegt in Jesus, liegt in seinem Wirken".

After Jesus' death those of his followers who remained faithful to his message identified the coming Son of Man with Jesus. Thus they came to believe that Jesus would return from heaven and act as judge and saviour of mankind for God (1 Thess 1,10)<sup>48</sup>.

Although the followers of Jesus who continued his preaching after his death certainly made Jesus' role a part of that preaching, as we have outlined, the pattern of their preaching remained the same as it had been for Jesus: God's rule is coming, and under that rule there will be salvation for those who have already begun to act accordingly and to put their trust in God. A new element was added by the idea that salvation had become possible above all through the death of Jesus. By this death God had reconciled himself with those who remained, who had been attached to Jesus and who relied on God for their salvation. This is in outline the way in which the earliest Christian preaching developed.

Two things require our attention in this development. Firstly, there was continuity between what Jesus preached about the coming of God's rule and the preaching of a number of his followers on the same thing after his death<sup>49</sup>.

Secondly, just like the preaching of Jesus, the preaching of the first of his followers to continue his work after his death was concerned chiefly with *God's* actions and not with those of Jesus. In both cases, it was primarily about theology and not christology. Following Jesus, the first Christians taught that God was engaged in bringing about a turning point in history, in fact that he had definitively intervened in history by sending a final messenger to announce that turning point. The central point was God's final act of intervention in the history of the world. That is theology with far reaching consequences for ethics. Christology, for Jesus<sup>50</sup> and his disciples, and for those who took up his preaching after his death, was subsumed into this theology. Originally the idea of Jesus' resurrection only had a place within the subsumed christology. It is true that immediately after Jesus' death all those of his followers who continued his preaching believed in this resurrection as an expression of

48. For a more detailed discussion of the origins of the belief in Jesus' second coming, see my *Les origines historiques de l'attente du retour de Jésus*, in *ÉTR* 74 (1999) 491-503.

49. This continuity is clearly illuminated by M. DE JONGE, *Christologie im Kontext Die Jesusrezeption des Urchristentums*, Neukirchen/Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1995, pp. 206-221.

50. The question to what extent Jesus made his view on his own mission explicit, i.e., to what extent he had an explicit besides an implicit christology, is of course the subject of much discussion.

their faith that God had acknowledged the truth of his last prophet. But it was not a central element in the first Christian theology. It was important above all (a) as an expression of their trust that God had sanctioned the work of Jesus on earth; and (b) as a way of making it easier to imagine the role which Jesus still had to fulfil as judge and saviour in the coming definitive breakthrough of God's rule.

True, Jesus' followers only continued their theological preaching of Jesus after his death in a form in which Jesus' unique role as the messenger sent by God, his death and resurrection were constitutive elements. They did not revert to the Jewish apocalyptic tradition without Jesus. What they continued was a theological preaching in which God was regarded as acting through Jesus' earthly work, including his death and resurrection. To that extent faith in the resurrection of Jesus was an integral part of early Christian theology. And certainly their confidence that Jesus had risen and been exalted was one of the factors which helped his followers to continue his theological preaching. Belief in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus was a catalyst for the earliest history of the church; it gave Christians the strength and inspiration to preach and act. Nevertheless, as Marxsen said, we must stick to the point that "the resurrection of Jesus is not the central datum of Christianity"<sup>51</sup>. The central point, from the earliest times, was *God's* intervention in history, the coming of *his* rule.

The view for which I argue here, that the history of the church did not begin with the appearances or the discovery of the empty tomb, but with the historical Jesus himself, is often disputed on the grounds of the utter despair which must have overcome the disciples after Jesus was taken captive and put to death. This despair is supposed to have prevented them from being able to hold fast after his death to the expectations he had raised in them of the coming of God's kingdom and his own leading role in it. A new impulse, in the form of the empty tomb or the appearances, is assumed to have been necessary to explain how the apostles found the will to go on preaching after Jesus' death. But this appeal to the disappointment or despair of the followers of Jesus will not hold water, as R. Pesch has already argued convincingly<sup>52</sup>. The New Testament yields no solid information about the psychic state of Jesus' followers

51. MARXSEN, *Die Auferstehung Jesu* (n. 3), p. 37: "So muss also daran festgehalten werden, dass die Auferweckung Jesu nicht das christliche Zentraldatum ist" BROER, "Seid stets bereit" (n. 4), pp. 32-33 rightly points out that in many New Testament writings and in much of the further early Christian and Patristic literature the theme of Jesus' resurrection plays only a minor part or no part at all.

52. PESCH, *Entstehung* (n. 21), pp. 219-221.

immediately before and after his crucifixion<sup>53</sup> The relevant accounts have been too heavily shaped by reflections in Christian circles about Jesus' passion and death And even if one looks more closely at the passion narratives in which there are suggestions of the disappointment of the disciples, these passages turn out, when taken in their proper context, to offer no support for the thesis of the despair of the disciples I shall briefly mention the chief passages

The flight of the disciples after the taking of Jesus (Mk 14,50) refers to their fear of the crowd bearing swords and clubs (14,43) which accompanied Judas, and not to any abandonment of their faith in the value of Jesus' preaching Moreover, the passage appears to be inspired by the wish to show the fulfilment of Isa 53,3 he was "forsaken by all" (LXX) Peter's denial (Mk 14,66-72) was a white lie, uttered in a threatening situation for the best of motives It was not an inner renunciation of his faith in Jesus' preaching, as is shown by the close "he began to weep" (Mk 14,72) Furthermore, the account of the denial also has the fulfilment of a prophecy in view (Zech 13,7, cited in Mk 14,27) Mark says nothing about any disillusionment of the disciples after the crucifixion Nor does he say that the return to Galilee (Mk 16,7) was motivated by despair They left for Galilee, according to Matthew, in obedience to a command of Jesus (Mt 28,16), in accordance with an interpretation of Mk 16,7 and 14,28 which is very possible in principle

Luke writes of the disciples' disbelief of the women's report that Jesus had risen (24,11) But this was a redactor's revision and expansion of the source (Mk 16,8) A rhetorical intention is also involved by contrasting the initial incredulity of the disciples with their later recognition of the resurrection, the recognition is put on firmer ground and thus carries greater conviction with the reader Those who went to Emmaus did indeed show signs of disappointment, but the relevant passage (Lk 24,19-21) betrays very strongly the redactor's hand of Luke And here too Luke seeks to make his report of Jesus' appearance more convincing by contrasting the recognition of the risen Christ with the distrust that preceded it In historical terms we know nothing of any disillusion and disillusionment among Jesus' disciples just before and after his crucifixion

The conclusion is the same Christian preaching did not emerge shortly after Jesus' death as a result of visionary experiences or the finding of

53 PESCH, *Entstehung* (n 21), p 219 BROER, *Seid stets bereit* (n 4), p 57 But Broer goes on to accept the alleged disillusionment of the disciples after the crucifixion as historically plausible and then explains their visionary experiences psychologically as caused by a state of psychic disorder, 'eine schwere Erschütterung des Ichs' (p 58)

his empty tomb, but was the continuation of the positive response which the historical Jesus had inspired among his followers before his death. The social forms which the movement initiated by Jesus assumed within first-century Palestine before and shortly after his death demand separate treatment<sup>54</sup>. Here we must be content to state once again that Christianity had its origin in the reaction that the historical Jesus brought about among his followers before his death.

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54 For a succinct but sociologically plausible account of the origins and early development of the Jesus movement, with due attention given to the continuity between the periods before and after Jesus' death, see L. M. WHITE, Art *Christianity*, in *ABD* 1 (1992) 926-935, esp pp 927-928. G. THEISSEN, *Soziologie der Jesusbewegung Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Urchristentums* (Theologische Existenz heute, 194), Munich, Kaiser, 1977, is mainly interested in the post-Easter period of the Jesus movement ("die nachosterliche Jesusbewegung" [p 12], dated "ca 30 bis 70 n Ch" [p 9]). Moreover, Theissen shows a tendency to project sociological information gleaned from the gospels back onto the pre-Easter period of the Jesus movement. G. SCHILLE, *Ubergange von Jesus zur Kirche*, in *SNTU* 12 (1987) 85-98, does argue for the continuity, rather than a new beginning of the Jesus movement after Jesus' death and rightly points at the announcement of God's reign, derived from the preaching of Jesus, as one of the elements in this continuity. But Schille still seems to me to see too much discontinuity.



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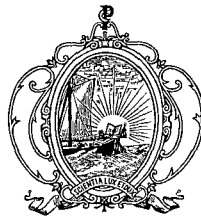
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