

1896

# The conversion of the apostle Paul

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THESIS.

THE CONVERSION OF THE APOSTLE PAUL.

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BOOKS CONSULTED.

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F. C. Baur. "Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ."

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1.

In the history of the early Christian church there is no more important event than the conversion of Paul. Christianity, while Paul was its persecutor, was little else than Judaism accommodated to the Messiahship of Christ. With Paul the Apostle we find a freedom from all the ceremonies and lifeless forms of the old religion. Christianity, instead of being a religion of the Jews, confined to Jewish territory, was preached to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews in churches which Paul had founded in the <sup>principal</sup> ~~provincial~~ cities of the known world.

Before Paul's journey to Damascus, what the church lacked was a leader; one freed from the narrowness and exclusiveness of Judaism; one who could grasp the doctrines of the cross and relate them to the older religion; one who would be intrepid in carrying these doctrines, in the face of persecution and even death, to the nations of the earth. To Paul, once the persecutor, then the apostle of Christianity, this leadership was assigned. By his loyalty to truth and daring spirit the church was saved from Judaism, and Christianity-- "the world religion", began its all-conquering march which will make it the religion of the world. Next to the founder of the church himself Paul is the most important personage in the history of the church.

The event, that took place on the way to Damascus, which revolutionized his life, and gave him the impetus for the great work which was assigned to him, is worthy of most careful study.

There is one thing around which all the statements about Paul's conversion center. About it all the events of his life may be clustered, as everything before it seems a preparation for it, and everything following flows from it. This is the appearance of Christ to Paul on the way to Damascus. No other thing in apostolic history has been so fully discussed and on no other point, perhaps, has hostile criticism been more active.

Several different views have been held concerning Christ's appearance to Paul.

1. The "Hallucination" Theory will be considered first.

Renaud is the chief representative of the supporters of this theory. He holds that there was no such thing as an appearance of Christ to Paul. Paul may have thought that Christ appeared to him; but it was an hallucination, a deception. With his vivid word-painting he pictures Paul, the persecutor, on his way to Damascus--with a heart heavy with his doubts as to the course he was pursuing, when the fatigue of the

journey with his preoccupation overwhelmed him. Paul had inflamed eyes--incipient ophthalmia, which in the last hours of the journey is most dangerous. It may have been the passage from the sun of the plains to the cool of shade <sup>all</sup> ~~caused~~ a fever which is always sudden and accompanied by delirium in these latitudes, prostrating the victim as by a thunder-stroke. It is quite certain that a terrible stroke deprived Paul of consciousness, and threw him to the ground. It is possible that a thunder shower may have caused Paul's hallucination, the lightning producing the impression that he had seen Christ, the one with whose image his mind was filled. As impetuous natures pass immediately from one extreme to the other, Paul was transformed from a persecutor of Christ to a humble follower."

This charge, that Paul was deceived, is hardly worth consideration. His experience on the way to Damascus was the turning-point of his life. His manner of life was changed. He became one of the despised sect he had persecuted. He gave up honor among his people to endure their hatred and wrath.

For thirty years he preached the Christ he had despised, suffering hunger and thirst, shipwreck, imprisonment, scourgings, and, finally, death for his new found Master. It was surely

a wonderful deception that led him to such a life of self-sacrifice! Then in all his letters we gather no hint of his even having the faintest idea that he had been deceived. With what confidence he exclaims, "I know him whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that I have committed unto him against that day." 2 Tim. 1:12.

This change in Paul's life was linked with a radical change in his belief. The law of the Pharisees was exchanged for the gospel of Christ, righteousness by works for righteousness by faith. Before his conversion we see him hounding to death those holding the views which he soon was preaching at the risk of his life. These new beliefs must have had to do with his conversion. Now if he was deceived in regard to the central fact of his conversion, is it not probable that he was likewise deceived in the doctrines he taught? Accepting deception here, Paul's epistles lose much of their trustworthiness. His belief developed with his inner experience of spiritual things. If he is not to be trusted in relating facts of his spiritual life, he surely is not to be trusted in the doctrines that arose in connection with these facts, or sprung from them. We are not prepared to accept such a conclusion. Admitting that Paul stated what he believed to be true, the duty yet

remains for those charging deception to prove that he was one to be so deceived.

Renan's picture of Paul's bodily weakness is largely drawn from his fertile imagination. That Paul tells us that he was afflicted with some bodily ailment, possibly ophthalmia, though this is a disputed point in exegesis, does not prove him the weak, pitiable creature here depicted. His years of endurance are proof to the contrary. If Paul had the incipient ophthalmia and a fever, he surely was conscious of it at the time and the vision which came on as Renan states during his delirium would not have had the weight it had with him when he had returned to a sound mind.

Paul's sound-mindedness must be admitted. If this was a deception, why aren't there other events in his life that may be similarly explained? Is it possible that one who was so thoroughly logical in his reasoning, that there are few pieces of literature extant that are so logically constructed as some of his letters, and whose keenness of intellect is felt all through his writings, is it possible that one by whose letters the theology of the Christian church is being moulded that Paul could have been led to believe that a delirium vision was a reality?



If we accept Renan's "hallucination" theory here we are led into adopting it wherever a difficulty arises--wherever it seems necessary to overthrow the miraculous. His application of the same line of reasoning to the resurrection of Christ is as disgusting as it is ingenious. He held the resurrection of Christ to be a myth. Mary at the tomb saw not the bodily form of the Master. She asserted the dream she had and imposed on everyone the vision of a passionate soul. The visions of the others who claimed they saw the risen Christ were modeled on that of Mary's.

Coming to the problem of Paul's vision with the determination to accept only that which can be explained by material laws, and not admitting the supernatural working in the present world, Renan's conclusion is predetermined and only those will follow him who have a bent for fanciful interpretation and agree with him in having none of the miraculous.

2. The Psychological Theory or the Vision Hypothesis. as it is sometimes called, is a later and more prevalent mode of explaining Christ's appearance to Paul. It is but little less rationalistic than Renan's thunder and lightning theory. Both theories hold that Paul was self-deluded; that though he may have thought he saw Christ, he was mistaken. While

Renan holds to outward phenomena and disease as the cause of the delusion, the Vision Hypothesis makes the subjective conditions the cause. There was nothing miraculous about it. It was merely a fancy picture and had no color of reality--a picture built up by a mind at white heat of controversy between two positions.

Pfleiderer (Hibbert Lectures 1885, pg.1--36) holds this view. He says; "An excitable nervous temperament, a soul which has been violently agitated and torn by the most terrible doubts, a most vivid phantasy, occupied with the awful scenes of persecution on the one hand and on the other the ideal image of Christ; in addition the nearness of Damascus with the urgency of decision, the lonely stillness, the scorching and blinding heat of the desert--in fact everything combined to produce one of those ecstatic states in which the soul believes that it sees those images and conceptions which profoundly agitate it, as if they were phenomena." It was in this manner that Paul thought he really saw the risen Christ. This vision showed him that the crucified Jesus was the Lord of heaven and the fundamental principle of his gospel was settled in his mind and he determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Lord."

The position of Pfleiderer, who is perhaps the best representative of this class of thinkers, is clearly untenable

to any one who will interpret the Acts and Paul's Epistles in their true bearing and give them their true weight. Let us proceed to an examination of the theory.

The first fact to be noted is that it assumes that Paul's mind was filled with doubts as to the course he was pursuing; an assumption that has not been substantiated. It is thought that his journey to Damascus would give him time for thought over his mission. The scene of Stephen's martyrdom would rise before him exciting surprise that one would die for a false belief. The dying words of the first Christian martyr would run through his mind, pointing him to a Messiah. The shout of triumph which escaped the lips of the Christians he had brought to death, would ring in his ears and he would be led to wonder whether after all the hated Christ was not the Messiah promised by the prophets. The longer he thought of this the more doubtful he became of the rightness of his persecution, and the clearer he became that Jesus, who could give the Christians the power to meet death with firmness and a joyful triumph, must be the Messiah. It is when his mind is filled with the image of the ideal Messiah that he thinks he sees the Messiah and thinks he hears him say: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the goad." (Acts 26:14).

This is the only passage that can be cited to prove

Paul's doubt in regard to his persecution, and it is with a mistaken meaning that it is made to lend its support to the theory. Paul's conscience, it is thought, is urging him to another course and goading him as he refuses to follow it. The figure of the goad does not warrant this interpretation. It refers to resistance of forces outside of one's self rather than a conflict with inward doubts and hesitancy. The meaning is rather, "It is hard for you to oppose my will in your persecuting the Church. For I, the risen Christ, your Messiah, am the head of it. It is as useless for you to resent my will as it is for the ox to kick against the goad of his driver.

This interpretation alone harmonizes with the following statements of Paul himself, which show conclusively that there was no inward conflict in regard to the rightness of the course he was pursuing. "I really thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." (Acts 26:9). Before the council at Jerusalem he declared, "I have lived before God in all good conscience until this day." (Acts 23:1). The thought of his career as a persecutor brought a regret to him, but this was after his conversion and we have no hint that he doubted the justice of his cruelty before that event. In I Tim. 1:13 he says, "Though I was before a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious, howbeit I obtained

mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief."

There is also no sign of hesitation which would result from doubt. "As touching zeal", he was, "persecuting the church as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless." (Phil. 3:6). "Beyond measure" he "persecuted the church of God and made havoc of it;" "Being more exceedingly jealous for the traditions of the fathers. (Gal. 1:13,14). He was "exceedingly mad against" the Christians (Acts 26:11), and was "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord." (Acts 9: 1).

That Paul's doubts are raised by the growing certainty of the Messiahship of Jesus is lacking in proof, and from the attitude of the zealous Pharisee toward Christ it seems beyond probability that a belief in Christ's Messiahship could have been held by Paul with his zeal for the law and the traditions of the fathers. The cross was a stumbling block, a cause of offense to the Pharisee. (I Cor. 1:23. Gal. 5:11). It to them was a proof that God did not own Christ as the Messiah. But it is claimed that the Christians taught that a propitiation was necessary before a sinful people could receive the kingdom of heaven, and that the apparent condemnation was removed by God's raising Christ from the dead. Paul, it is further said,

as a Pharisee believed in a resurrection and must have been clear to him that the people would not receive the Messianic <sup>it</sup> salvation without an atonement.

In answer to this it can be said that, though the Messianic prophecies pointed forward to vicarious suffering for sin, yet it was in no wise connected by the Pharisees with such a death as Christ suffered. They expected a king, clothed in purple and armed with authority to come and rule over them. Christ came in humility and gave up his life like a common criminal. Such an atonement was not in Paul's thought.

The Pharisees believed in a resurrection of the dead only at the end of time, at the renewing of heaven and earth. An individual resurrection before the end of time was just as incredible and inconceivable to Paul as to the disciples of Jesus on Easter day. The Pharisees did judge kindly of the Christian view of the resurrection as set forth by Paul, but they did not accept it in regard to Christ's resurrection. (Acts 23:9).

The only image that might have been in Paul's mind was that of an enemy of the law in obedience to which he was trusting for salvation,--the Christ crucified like a felon. It would have been impossible for Paul to turn to such a one

as the Messiah, and beides it would have taken more than the statement of the hated Christians or a mental picture thus formed to convince him of the resurrection of Christ.

It must be admitted that to form an image in Paul's mind that would work his conversion, he must have possessed previous to his conversion the fundamental facts of the gospel plan of salvation. To overcome his prejudice against the cross, so as to believe in Christ's Messiahship, he must have believed in the necessity of Christ's death. The atonement recognized he would see that obedience to the law was not the method of obtaining God's favor--justification by faith would be made clear. For before he would reject the law he must be brought to a surety of another method of salvation. The chain of reasoning that formed the image of Christ, causing Paul to think he really saw the Lord, must thus have been founded on the truth in regard to these doctrines.

From whom did Paul receive these teachings in regard to Christ? They could not have been the result of his own reasoning based on the information furnished him by the followers of Christ. Because, 1. The possession of such knowledge would probably have led him to doubts as to the justice of his persecution. Paul's statements, as has been shown, are opposed to such doubts.

2. His belief as a Pharisee, which has been given, was in direct opposition to that of the Christians; so that it would be with the greatest difficulty that he would be forced to accept these new views,

3. We have the direct testimony of Paul that he did not receive his gospel, of which the teachings cited above are chief, from men. He says in Gal. 1:11--12, "For I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel, which was preached by me, that it is not after man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me, <sup>this</sup> ~~this~~ revelation of Jesus Christ."

By Paul's own testimony, then, these essential doctrines were revealed to him by Christ and not by men.

3. An inner spiritual vision expressed in terms of an outward vision.

Is it not possible that there was such a revelation through Christ himself to Paul's mind that it would transform him from the fierce persecutor to the humble Christian and would give him such a certainty of Christ's Messiahship, his resurrection and exaltation, that an inward vision thus formed would be expressed as we have it in the three accounts of the Acts--the seeming reality of an outward vision being



simply symbolic of the inner experience?

This is not Pfleiderer's view. He thinks that it was by a long continued presentation of the facts of Christian belief and by <sup>a</sup> course of reasoning concerning them that Paul was led to accept Christ. This third view is really what we hold to be yet remaining of Pfleiderer's view after the above consideration of it. Much if not all the argument to be advanced is applicable to the "Vision Hypothesis" as it is to the view set forth at the beginning of this section.

This view may be stated thus: The vision was only an inner one, formed by a direct revelation of the truth of the Messiahship of Christ, given soon before or at his conversion, and that the accounts of the event in Acts are simply symbolic of the inner experience as many, if not all, of his visions were.

The following points are to be considered in relation to this view. 1. The statements of the accounts in Acts.

The fact that the attendants did not see Christ (Acts 9:8), is thought to show that he did not appear to Paul's outward vision. That a comparison between what the attendants saw and what Paul saw should be made seems to be an effort on the part of the writer to show that Paul's vision differed from that of the attendants. If they were "beholding no man", Paul, it naturally

follows was beholding some one.

Besides this objection is made by those alone who deny the miraculous in the event. The whole occurrence leads into the realm of the supernatural. That the attendants did not see Christ while Paul did, argues nothing against Paul's having seen him. Either their eyes were holden or Paul's were specially opened to see the Lord. How easily Christ appeared to his disciples or vanished from their sight. (Luke 24:16--31). Is it not possible that by some miraculous power he could appear to Paul and not be seen by the attendants? With those who believe in God's working in a miraculous way in the present world, there is no difficulty in agreeing with Neander who makes the following statement in his "Planting and Training of the Christian Church." "As the phenomenon from its very nature cannot be judged of according to the ordinary earthly communications and perceptions, the difference in the perception of Paul and his attendants argues nothing against the objective reality of Paul's vision."

The other statements of the Acts all testify to the objective vision.

Acts 26:16. Christ says to Paul, "For this end have I appeared unto thee." Acts 22:14. Ananias tells Paul, "The

Lord God of our fathers hath appointed thee to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth."

Acts 9:27. "Barnabas took him (Paul) and brought him to the apostles and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way and that he had spoken to him."

These statements are consistent with nothing else but an objective appearance. It seems impossible that such statements should be simply symbolic of an inner experience. The whole occurrence is painted in the colors and tone of reality. Baur and Pfleiderer both agree that Acts relate a real appearance of Christ--they doubt the historicity of Acts--. The trustworthiness of Acts has been already treated. The objective reality of Paul's mission, as here given is beyond question.

Paul had other visions which are admitted to have been simply subjective and yet are related in much the same way as the vision at Damascus.

2. Let us consider these visions comparing them with Paul's vision at his conversion.

It is said Paul was a man of visions. In 2 Cor. 12:1, he says, "I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. Being caught up into the third heaven and into Paradise would seem to indicate that Paul was an adept in visionary seeing.

If so was not the Damascus Christophany of the character of his other visions?

Acts 22:17 relates that Paul on his first visit to Jerusalem, after his conversion, fell into a trance and saw Christ and heard him speak to him.

That this does not necessitate the objective appearance is shown by the use of the same word in Acts 11:5. in reference to Peter's vision of the sheet let down from heaven, which appeared to him when in a trance.

The word trance, Ekstasis, is defined by Thayer as "a throwing of the mind out of its normal state--as when a man, who, by some sudden emotion is transported, as it were, out of himself, so that in his rapt condition, although he is awake, his mind is drawn off from all surrounding objects and wholly fixed on things divine; that he sees nothing but the forms and images lying within and thinks that he perceives with his bodily eyes and ears realities shown him by God."

This vision is not similar to the Damascus vision because:

a. This word ekstasis is not used in connection with Paul's conversion. Paul was not in a trance on his journey to Damascus.

b. According to the definition given for a vision of Christ it would have been necessary for him to have had his mind so concentrated on Christ that an image of Christ should appear to him. In our study of Paul's subjective conditions at the time of his conversion, we have pointed out that his mind was not taken up with the image of Christ.

c. That Paul, though under deep emotion, and though long thinking of Christ thought that he saw Christ, yet did not see him, is beyond credence. His conversion, his intense belief, his rich experience of divine things, and his life devoted <sup>service</sup> could not be founded on deception. Acts 16:9 gives the vision of the man from Macedonia. The Greek word here used is *Horama*, and is defined by Thayer as, "a sight divinely granted in an ecstasy or in sleep—a vision." A parallel incident and a similar use of the Greek word is the vision of the Lord to Paul at Corinth. The same word is used in the following places, Acts 9:10, Ananias' vision, Acts 10:17, Peter's vision at Joppa, Acts 10:3, Cornelius's vision of the angels. To find the use of the word we must turn to Acts 12:9 which relates to Peter's deliverance from prison. It reads, "He went out and followed; and he wist not that it was true (Alethes) which was done by the angel, but thought that he saw a vision" (Horama). Horama is then not a real seeing, but only the

presentation of the images to the mind. In whatever incident, then, this word is used, the images presented to the mind are not <sup>true</sup> images, but exist only in the mind.

However the Damascus vision differs from these which the Acts define, Acts 12:9, as not real seeing.

a. In all these visions no person is mentioned as present except the one to whom the vision is given. In the three accounts of Paul's conversion the attendants are present and note the phenomena accompanying the vision.

b. There is nothing unusual in these visions. From all outward manifestations they could have been but dreams. In the accounts of the Damascus visions there is "a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun" so that Paul was blinded for three days.

In two of the visions--those of Cornelius and of Peter, were given while the recipients were at prayer. Possibly, Paul received his vision of the man of Macedonia while engaged in prayer for divine guidance. He had been kept from the course he wished to pursue by the influence of the Spirit. It is likely that he spent part of the night in seeking for God's direction, and a "vision appeared to him in the night."

Paul the persecutor on the road to Damascus presents

a far different attitude than Paul in prayer at Troas.

An attitude surely less likely for a vision such as would come in the quiet of the hour of prayer.

In Acts 26: 19 Paul speaks of having had at his conversion a "heavenly vision"--("not disobedient unto the heavenly vision."). The Greek word here, Hoptasia, is defined as "a sight, a vision, an apparandé presented to one whether asleep or awake."

The only other places where the word is used in the New Testament are Luke 1:22, Zacharias' vision of the angel Gabriel. Luke 24:22, the vision of angels seen by the women at the empty tomb. 2 Cor. 12:1. Here Paul uses the word with reference to a vision, which must be recognized as having no objective reality. "The third heaven", "Paradise", and "unspeakable words" are not sights and sounds for physical eyes or ears.

The use of the word Hoptasia in Acts 26:19 does not place the Damascus vision in the same class as that of the visions mentioned in 2 Cor. 12:1 since the other uses of the word refer to objective visions. Luke 1:22, 24:22.

Paul's vision at his conversion is not one of the visions mentioned in 2 Cor. 12:1, nor can it be connected in any way with that vision, since,

a. In 2 Cor. 12:1 ff. Paul speaks of his visions because

forced to do so. He shows a repugnance to revealing his inner experience and instead of proceeding with the list of visions he had begun, he makes a sudden stop.

In regard to his conversion Paul spoke freely and willingly. It is his constant subject. He reverts to it as the basis of his life in Christ and as an authentication of his divine commission.

b. In the vision here given Paul is in uncertainty in regard to his ecstatic condition-when it took place. His conversion is always spoken of with definiteness and certainty. The revelation of his conversion was that of a risen Lord. It is never spoken of as an ecstatic vision.

c. The time at which he saw the vision of 2 Cor. 12:1 is definitely stated--"14 years ago"--The first letter to the Corinthians was written about 58 A.D. This vision occurred about 44 A.D. from 8--10 years after his conversion.

By this comparison we have found that Paul's vision at Damascus cannot be classed with <sup>his</sup> other visions. That which wrought his conversion was not a trance, a dream, or an ecstatic state. It was a real outward vision of Christ. The whole scene is gathered around the appearance of the risen Lord to the persecutor of the Church, transforming him into an



apostle.

### 3. Paul's statements in his epistles.

In answer to all theories which make this vision of Paul's but a subjective experience, whether it be Renan's "Hallucination" theory, or Pfleiderer's "Psychological" theory, or that of an inner vision expressed in terms of an outer vision, in answer to all these we have hold to the last as conclusive, Paul's own statements concerning his Damascus vision--given in his epistles. These argue conclusively for an objective appearance of Christ to Paul.

I Cor. 9:1 reads, "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?"

Here Paul bases his apostleship on his seeing Christ. Two questions arise concerning this. First, Could it have been in a vision that he saw Christ?

He must have had a real vision of him as the other apostles for he compares his claims to apostolic office with theirs, and then if he had not seen Christ it is not likely that the apostles would have accepted him as an apostle.

Second, at what time Paul saw Christ. The statement is made that he saw him while Christ was yet on earth. But this seems hardly possible, because, Paul would not have based his

apostleship on the sight of Christ, while he himself was in open rebellion. Then it took something more than the sight of Christ to make an apostle. Paul's commission was received on the road to Damascus and his vision of Christ must be connected with this event.

In I Cor. 15:8, Paul makes his vision of Christ a proof of Christ's resurrection. "And last of all, as unto one born out of due time he appeared to me also."

Here likewise Paul places his vision of the risen Christ along with that of the other apostles and gives it as much weight in proof as theirs. This must have been an outward vision, for, with Paul's hatred of the Nazarene, who has suffered the worst of indignities and punishments--crucifixion, a mere subject<sup>ive</sup> vision would not have answered for proof to his own mind nor to those to whom he wrote. This vision could not have been before the risen Christ's ascension; for in that case we would not find him persecuting the church.

It is against the resurrection of Christ for which Paul in this passage (I Cor. 15:8) is presenting proof, that much of the animus of the critics of an objective appearance of Christ to Paul is aimed. Their non-acceptance of the resurrection of our Lord leads them to reject the supernatural,

appearance of Christ to Paul.

Neander clearly states the incapacity of such critics of the objective appearance. "In the explanation of the transaction of which we are speaking, it is of importance in what relations the inquirer is placed to that on which the essence of the Christian faith rests and that with which it falls.—The fact of the actual resurrection of Christ. Whoever acknowledges this, occupies a standpoint where he can have no motive to deny the supernatural in the history that is connected with that fact. Such a person can have no ground for mistrusting the expression of Paul concerning the appearance to him of the risen Saviour. But, whoever from his own point of view cannot acknowledge the actual resurrection of Christ, is so far incapacitated for admitting the objective nature of this appearance to Paul and must from the first stand in a hostile relation to it."

In regard to Paul's sight of Christ we have endeavored to show that Renan's theory of "hallucination" is simply imaginative since it is founded on the self-deception of one least likely to be deceived: that Pfleiderer's theory of an inward conflict and thus of an inner vision is untenable because of lack of proof of any doubt on Paul's part in regard to his persecutions, or as claimed, of a growing certainty of Christ's

Messiahship and that the vision was not simply an inner one from the accounts in the Acts and by a comparison of Paul's other visions with the one on the way to Damascus. Finally in opposition to all subjective theories the direct statements of Paul in his epistle have been cited.

From the arguments that have been advanced and from the proof cited the conclusion is reached that Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus in a real outward form.