

The Transfigured Paul | BY ROY BRANSON

My first memory of Paul goes back to Damascus. As part of an Adventist missionary's family, I was shown, with great confidence, the very window in the city wall from which Paul was lowered in a basket to escape his pursuers

Since that trip to Damascus, I have met many Pauls—and so have you. Probably the most familiar Paul is the advocate of righteousness by faith, not works—the Paul of Luther who has brought the comfort of forgiveness, justification, and grace to millions. This Reformation Paul has been important in the Adventist Church since at least 1888. More recently, this Paul has driven the teaching of Edward Heppenstall and Desmond Ford, and enriched the ministry of hundreds of pastors.

In the 1960s, another Paul appeared in the halls of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. James Cox, head of the New Testament Department, had studied with Krister Stendhal, the Swedish Lutheran who headed Harvard's New Testament Department and subsequently became the dean of Harvard Divinity School. After World War II and the Holocaust, Stendhal found a Paul who focused on Jewish-Gentile relations. Paul's disputations were not over doctrine, Stendhal insisted. Paul was arguing for toleration of ethnic diversity.

I remember team teaching Andrews University Sabbath School classes with James Cox. Repeatedly, he would say what Stendhal was convincingly telling a generation of New Testament scholars and pastors: The important parts of Pauline epistles were those neglected sections at the end, full of concrete, pastoral admonitions, particularly how Jews and Gentiles could live together in the emerging Christian congregations.

A century and a half after 1844, Adventists bury relatives and friends, still weep until the day-dawn, still endure the Great Disappointment of God's hiddenness. We ask how Paul might respond to the question, What today should be the message and mission of Adventism?



IN ITS QUEST, nothing could reenergize this apocalyptic Adventist Church more than discovering the transfigured Paul. Paul tells the Corinthian church that he receives "visions and revelations of the Lord" (2 Cor. 12:1); that is, he receives visions as well as apocalypses or unveilings of the risen Lord, what James Dunn has called "a sense of the divine presence of Christ."¹

However reluctantly, Paul refers to a specific vision when he was caught up fourteen years earlier to the third

heaven; "whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not now—God knows." Indeed, he "was caught up to Paradise," and "heard inexpressible things..." (2 Cor. 12:1).

Murray-Jones and others believe Paul is here putting himself in an ancient visionary, apocalyptic tradition going all the way back to Ezekiel. In his call to the exiled poet, God sweeps Ezekiel up into the divine throne chariot, ascending to the heavenly sanctuary.² "Paul", says Griffith-Jones, "is a poet" who rightly sees himself in the grand tradition of other visionary poets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel.³

Ezekiel

Narrator/Ezekiel: *In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God... As I looked a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures... over the living creatures there was something like a dome shining crystal, spread above their heads... and there came a voice from above the dome... and there was a splendor all around... there was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.*

When I saw it I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking.

The Lord God: *O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you... Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to the nation of rebels who have rebelled against me... O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll and go, speak to the house of Israel... speak my very words to them... say to them, "thus says the Lord God," whether they hear or refuse to hear.*

—from Ezekiel 1 and 2 (NRSV)

As in the calls to Isaiah and Daniel, luminous clouds and smoke envelop Ezekiel, fire flashes, the human bows in awe before the glory of the Lord. Following the dazzling light, a voice calls, a commission is uttered, and the messenger departs from the presence of the Almighty to fulfill a mission given from on high.

Paul, like the great visionary poets of Scripture, is awed by the majesty and beauty of the disclosures or apocalypses granted to him. Paul's "letters," Griffith-Jones, insists, "are not quarries from which we mine a couple of

handy doctrines," but poetry conveying us to realms of worship which prose cannot reach.⁴

Because years of Paul's life were immersed in studying and being in the presence of these visionary poets, Paul understands his mission as also proceeding from the holy of holies, from the divine presence itself. The early church shared in placing great importance on a visionary, apocalyptic authentication of ministry. When Luke-Acts comes to be written, Luke includes not one, but three accounts of the divine presence descending on Saul, transfiguring him into an apostle of the Lord. Before an angry Jerusalem crowd, Paul is shown providing a succinct description of his encounter.

Paul

Narrator/Paul: *About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me,*

Jesus: *"Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?"*

Saul: *"Who are you, Lord?"*

Jesus: *"I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting."*

Narrator/Paul: *My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.*

Paul: *"What shall I do, Lord?"*

Jesus: *"Get up... and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do."*

—Acts 22:6–10 (NIV)

Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is, according to scholars like Michael J. Gorman, the defining experience of his life.⁵ As Bruce Chilton puts it, "Paul's vision gave him the theme of his thought and of his life."⁶ The account in Acts is in the form of a prophetic call.⁷ Paul, like the visionary poets before him, is surprised. He, like Isaiah and Ezekiel and Daniel, understands his experience in the context of the sanctuary, of the temple.

The visionary prophets and Paul are all convinced that the light that has shined on them radiates from the holy of holies, that they have been enveloped in the *Kavod*, the divine presence. Their eyes have seen nothing less than the glory of the Lord.⁸ Paul, like his predecessors, prostrates himself before the daunting authority of the Holy.

Steeped in the sanctuary and temple traditions of Isaiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel, Paul knows that in apocalypses, the *eye* of the visionary prophet beholds the glory of the Lord; the *ear* hears the command to act. Out of the blinding bright-

ness before Paul, a voice commands, "Get up and go." Paul hears in the voice of Jesus of Nazareth echoes of the heavenly command to Ezekiel: "Now go up and stand on your feet (compare Ezek. 2:1, 3); he hears reverberations of words delivered to Isaiah: "I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light" (compare Isa. 42:7). From beholding the radiance of the Lord, messengers are dispersed—commissioned to dispel the darkness.

II

DOROTHY LEE, in her recent monograph, *Transfiguration*, suggests that Paul knew something of an account that Jesus himself had experienced an apocalypse, a transfiguration.⁹ That account of the transfiguration of Jesus later appears in the very center of Mark and in all of the Synoptic Gospels.

Christ

Narrator/Matthew: *After six days, Jesus took Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus,*

Peter: *"Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make here three [tents], one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."*

Narrator/Matthew: *While he was still speaking a bright cloud enveloped them, and behold a voice from the cloud said:*

God: *"This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"*

Narrator/Matthew: *When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them.*

Jesus: *"Get up.... Don't be afraid."*

—Matt. 17:1–9 (NIV)

Before Jesus proceeds to Jerusalem and his ministry of death and resurrection, he ascends a high mountain and encounters a bright cloud. On the high mountain, his face shines like the sun, his clothes glisten. An unveiling of divine majesty transfigures Jesus, and the glorified Jesus is, in turn, an apocalypse or revelation to the disciples.

The eyes of the disciples can see Jesus as the embodiment of the cloud of glory that enveloped Moses on

Mount Sinai, that swept Elijah to the heavenly realms, that rested in the sanctuary. But when Peter suggests an equality among Moses, Elijah, and Jesus—by proposing to build each of them a sanctuary—the ears of the disciples hear the words of command: "This is my Son... Listen to him!"

Luke depicts the disciples caught up in an experience reminiscent of the visionary prophets. The disciples see the light of God's Glory. They then hear the command to act. Overcome by the divine presence, the disciples prostrate themselves... until they hear Jesus' command, "get up, don't be afraid." The disciples, who have been gathered in worship, and been caught up in the transfiguration of their leader, descend from the mountain with the new Moses, and proceed on their exodus to Jerusalem.

III

PAUL, STEEPED IN THE imagery of temple worship, possibly aware of an account of Christ's transfiguration, himself recipient of "visions and revelations from the Lord" (I Cor. 12:1), not surprisingly develops what he calls "the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). For his Corinthian congregation, Paul compares earlier and later glories. At Sinai, Paul says in his second letter to the church in Corinth, Moses' face reflected his experience of the divine glory. Paul does not disparage Moses. He acknowledges his brightness. But Paul does say there is a greater and permanent glory—the glory that comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:10, 18).

At this point, Paul moves directly to the Christian Church—those who have been baptized into the Lord. Who are we? We are all the transfigured ones. Not one skilled mystic here, another spiritual adept there. No, declares Paul, "all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord, as though reflected in a mirror, are being *transfigured* into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18). Being transfigured reminds us that the Christian life is always a response to God. We are attracted to the beauty of the Holy and are formed into a clearer reflection of the divine.¹⁰

And what are we all to do? Paul answers six verses later in his admonition—his command—to the Corinthians: "Let light shine out of darkness... the light... of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

The transfigured life is life together in the church. The life of transfiguration is a form of worship.¹¹ The church's mission is to be Christ's radiant sanctuary in the world.

As we have seen, being transfigured in worship does not mean seeking sanctuary from the world. It means our movements in the world start and return to a center of meaning and exaltation; a time and a place alive with the songs of Zion, the music of prayer, the thundering words of the Almighty. We are drawn to the presence of God from which we are sent to wage peace and justice against the powers of darkness, in order that more of creation may be attracted to the pulsating warmth of holiness, and join wisdom in dancing before the Lord.

IV



IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY to be transfigured, to reflect the glory of God. The world sometimes darkens. A year ago, I buried my best friend, my brother Bruce. Last November, the best teacher I ever had, and a life-long mentor, died from cancer of the throat. Otilie Stafford, for

whom I was a student worker when she was the chair of the Atlantic Union College English Department, was born into an Adventist worker's home. She pummeled and harried the church she cared about to be more open, more fair, more just in its treatment of its members. She was also a person who turned teaching into worship. In one semester, she forever transformed the Bible for me, from black and white obligations to a multihued delight.

I have read again a testimony to the Adventist Church she wrote and called "The Holiness of Beauty."¹² Today, as on so many other days, she will have the last word. "Imagine a world," she begins, and describes the darkness experienced by the visionary poets of Scripture—and shared by the Ellen White of *Early Writings*.

*Imagine a world where sounds are only noise, never music,
where the "spontaneous particulars of sound"
have no ordering effect on a period of time,
where the journey of the mind and emotions
that takes place when the listener enters worship can never occur.*

In such a bleak, routinized world, she says:

*The divine command is to restructure our world,
to "sing a new song,"
to put something new and fresh into our daily experience,
to transfigure our experience
by imagining a restored world of perfect beauty
and shaping our lives by that vision.*

When she reaches her conclusion, she invites us to:

*"Imagine a world," where language is clear and honest,
where image and symbol and parable coincide exactly with reality,
where words do not break down under emotion,
but are filled with "an Elixir, an excitation, a pure power."
Imagine a world where song has won a final victory over silence
and solemnity,
where music is motion and motion music, and
both move about a center of serenity and joy.*

That vision, she reminds us, is at once "our lost homeland, our hope for the future, our strong conviction of what should be." And if the church will treasure its poetic, visionary imagination,

*Then perhaps in song and in words,
in architecture and in music,
in sculpture and in landscape gardening,
in liturgy and
in the words of the preacher,
the church may, even in this imperfect world,
join together in that great song of praise to the Creator
with the morning stars and the other Sons of God.*

Notes and References

1. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans: 1998), 401. See also page 25 in Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001): "This brings us to the ultimate meaning of Paul's vision and revelations. Recent study suggests that these may have been more numerous and more significant for Paul than previously thought." On page 36, Gorman points out that since at least Albert Schweitzer in the 1930s, a few students of Paul have insisted with Schweitzer that the doctrine of righteousness by faith is a "subsidiary crater formed within the rim of the main crater, the mystical doctrine of redemption through being-in-Christ" (*The Mysticism of the Apostle Paul* [London: Black: 1931], 225); what E. P. Sanders more recently has called "participation in Christ," (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism* [Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress: 1977], 431–523). I wish to thank John Jones, professor of New Testament at La Sierra University, for recommending Gorman's *Cruciformity* to me.

2. C.R.A. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1–12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate; Part 2: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and its Significance," *Harvard Theological Review* 86.3 (1993) 266–67; Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 24–25.

3. Robin Griffith-Jones, *The Gospel According to Paul: The Creative Genius Who Brought Jesus to the World* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco: 2004), 3. I wish to thank Elvina Tomenko, a doctoral student at Fuller Theological Seminary, for recommending this very helpful book to me.

4. *Ibid.*, 35.

5. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 23.

6. Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Doubleday: 2004), 35.

7. Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row: 1978), 436.

8. Griffith-Jones, *Gospel According to Paul*, 164–66; 504–5.

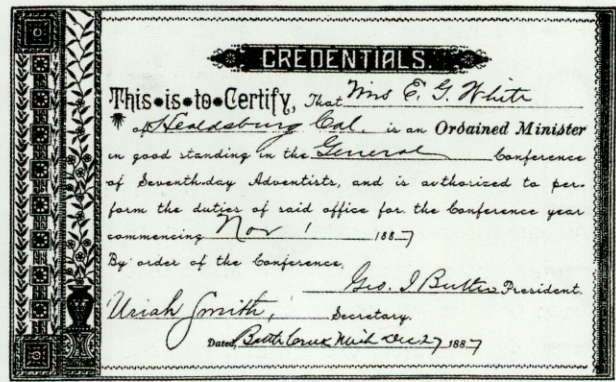
9. Dorothy Lee, *Transfiguration* (New York: Continuum: 2004), 113; Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 427.

10. Lee, *Transfiguration*, 113. "The verb used here is the same as in Mark and Matthew for Jesus' transfiguration (*metamorphoumetha*, 3:18; Mark 9:2; Matt.17:2)."

11. *Ibid.*, 114–15.

12. Otilie Stafford, "The Holiness of Beauty, or Why Imagination Matters," *Spectrum* 7.4 (April 1976):7–12.

Roy Branson is director of the Center for Law & Public Policy at Columbia Union College, and a former editor of *Spectrum*.



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