

# Repetition for a Reason

BY TIMOTHY CHURCHILL

In the book of Acts, Luke emphasizes Paul's unexpected encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road by repeating the story three times. Jesus' message to Paul in that story deserves our full attention, for it contains the entire gospel in kernel form.

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Paul's unexpected encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road was a pivotal moment in the history of the early church. In the book of Acts, Luke emphasizes the story by repeating it three times, first in narrative form (9:1-9), and later in two speeches (22:3-11; 26:4-20). While it is not the only story that Luke tells three times, it is, according to Craig Keener, "the longest substory within Acts' longer plot."<sup>1</sup> For years, scholars have struggled to understand why Luke tells this story as he does. Even today, this remains a "*crux interpretum* [crucial and difficult point of interpretation] in Acts research."<sup>2</sup>

In this article I will take a fresh look at how the Damascus road encounter is presented in the book of Acts.<sup>3</sup> I will begin by noting where Luke positions the three accounts within the larger work. Then I will explore how Luke varies his descriptions as he repeats the story, paying close attention to how Paul's pre-encounter persecutions, the heavenly light that appears, and Jesus' message to Paul are developed as the story is retold. I will conclude with some reflections on what we can learn from the way Luke has communicated the story of Jesus' appearance to Paul on the Damascus road.

Before we take a look at how Luke tells the story, we should first notice where each account is placed within the book of Acts. Using chapter markers as a rough guide, we see that Acts 9 is found at about the one-third

mark, Acts 22 just past the three-quarter mark, and Acts 26 at about the ninety percent mark. It's even more striking to view things from the end of Acts rather than from the beginning. Acts 26 occurs just two chapters from the end; Acts 22 occurs six chapters from the end, or three times further in; and Acts 9, nineteen chapters from the end, or three times further from the end than Acts 22. Simply put, the frequency intensifies with near mathematical precision as we approach the end of Acts. It seems that Luke wants his readers to remember the Damascus road story as they finish reading Acts! But what exactly does he want them to remember? This will become clear as we look at Luke's use of repetition in telling the story.

### **LUKE'S USE OF REPETITION**

Luke repeats the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus three times. Yet the story is not told in exactly the same way each time. Let's examine some of the variations to see if we can learn what Luke is trying to communicate through his use of repetition. I will focus on three key areas: Paul's pre-encounter persecutions of the early church, the heavenly light, and Jesus' message to Paul.

Regarding *Paul's pre-encounter persecutions*, in Acts 9:1 we find Paul breathing murderous threats. In Acts 22:4 we learn that Paul persecuted early Christians to the point of death and imprisonment. In Acts 26:9-11 Paul speaks of performing many hostile acts, imprisoning many holy ones in prisons, voting to condemn them to death, punishing them in the synagogues frequently, attempting to force them to blaspheme, and even pursuing them to foreign cities. From this we can see that Luke becomes increasingly intense in recounting Paul's pre-encounter persecution.

Luke's depiction of *the heavenly light* also develops through the three accounts. The light's brightness grows from "a light" (9:3), to "a great light" (22:6), to "a light brighter than the sun" at midday (26:13). The light's scope increases from "flashed around [Paul]" (9:3), to "shone about [Paul]" (22:6), to "shining around [Paul] and [his] companions" (26:13). The human response to the light also increases as Paul seemingly falls alone in the first two accounts (9:4; 22:7), but his companions fall with him in the third telling (26:14).<sup>4</sup> In other words, Luke increases the brightness and scope of the light, and the response to the light, with each retelling.

We now come to the heart of the Damascus road experience: *Jesus' message to Paul*.<sup>5</sup> Let's examine the three accounts to see what Luke is trying to communicate through his use of repetition in the message.

In Acts 9, Jesus' message consists of the cryptic statement, "you will be told what you are to do" (9:6). The Greek phrase translated "what" is used here to introduce the answer to an indirect question.<sup>6</sup> From the context it is clear that Paul's question must have been "What must I do?" But note that Jesus is responding to a question that has not been asked. To add to the

intrigue, Jesus does not really seem to answer Paul's implied question. So the message section of Acts 9 is rather strange, consisting of an implied question without a proper answer.

In Acts 22, Paul gives voice to the question we were expecting in Acts 9: "What am I to do, Lord?" (22:10). Jesus' response once again defers the full answer: "Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do." So in Acts 22 we get to hear Paul's question, but we still don't know exactly what message Jesus had for him.

In Acts 26, Paul's question is completely missing, but we finally hear the answer we have been waiting for:

But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

*Acts 26:16-18*

It appears, then, that Luke has constructed the entire sequence to arouse curiosity in the mind of his reader. The burning question is this: why did Jesus appear to Paul? Beginning with the hint of a question in Acts 9, and continuing with Jesus' apparent reluctance to answer Paul's question in Acts 22, Luke finally reveals that Paul did indeed receive his divine appointment from Jesus on the Damascus road in Acts 26. To put it more plainly, the three accounts have been crafted to climax with the revelation that Paul received his call as apostle to the Gentiles from Jesus on the Damascus road.

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**The story of Paul's encounter with Jesus is not told in the same way each time. What can learn from this? I will focus on three key areas: Paul's pre-encounter persecutions of the early church, the heavenly light, and Jesus' message to Paul.**

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### **WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM LUKE'S PRESENTATION**

Through the use of repetition, Luke has made every effort to draw the reader's attention to the Damascus road encounter between Jesus and Paul. As one nears the end of the book, the story should be ringing in one's ears

as it is repeated with increasing frequency and with more intense depictions of Paul's persecution of the early church, the heavenly light that appears, and the reaction of Paul and his companions. Luke uses this heightened awareness of the story to drive home the key point of the entire sequence: that Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus road in order to call him to be Apostle to the Gentiles.

Given the significance of the Damascus road encounter within the book of Acts, Jesus' message to Paul deserves our full attention. What more can we learn from the message (26:16-18)? First of all, we see that Paul's apostolic authority came straight from Jesus: "I have appeared to you...to appoint you." We also learn that Paul's mission to the Gentiles came directly from Jesus: "I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you." Paul's apostolic authority has major implications for us today, especially when we consider that Paul wrote nearly half the books in the New Testament! Second, we see the gospel in kernel form: Jesus calls Paul "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." Themes such as forgiveness, sanctification, and faith in Jesus deserve more attention than this article permits, unfortunately. Third, the message reflects a very high Christology. In the Old Testament, God is the one who rescues; yet here, Jesus is the one who rescues. In the Old Testament, God is the one who appoints his messengers; yet here, Jesus is the one who appoints Paul. In other words, Jesus is presented here in ways previously reserved for God alone.

Finally, Luke's use of repetition in the three accounts of the Damascus road encounter should remind us of how carefully the book of Acts has been constructed. Luke was intentional in presenting the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road in such a way that the reader is drawn to the message. Luke's use of repetition should also inspire us to study the book of Acts in detail. May we dig deeply into the message that Jesus had for Paul on the Damascus road, and indeed into the entire book of Acts, to see what more we can find!

#### NOTES

1 Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 3:1-14:28*, volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1598.

2 Daniel Marguerat, "Saul's Conversion (Acts 9, 22, 26) and the Multiplication of Narrative in Acts," in Christopher M. Tuckett, ed., *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 127-155, here citing 128.

3 A more detailed discussion may be found in Timothy W. R. Churchill, *Divine Initiative and the Christology of the Damascus Road Encounter* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 191-249.

4 For a good summary of the debate over apparent contradictions in the descriptions of Paul's travel companions, see C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts*

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*of the Apostles*, 2 volumes, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1994, 1998), 2:1038-1039.

5 Lohfink points to the increase in the three accounts with respect to Paul's call to mission: from call (Christ to Ananias) and call to mission (Ananias to Saul) in Acts 9, to announcement of the mission (Christ to Saul in Jerusalem) in Acts 9, to immediate mission (Christ to Saul from Damascus) in Acts 26. See Gerhard Lohfink, "Meinen Namen Zu Tragen... (Apg 9, 15)," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 10:1 (1996), 108-115, here citing 114.

6 See Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert Walker Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §300(1).

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