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Ashton, John

The Religion of Paul the Apostle

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In what ways are the experiences of the apostle Paul (and even those of Jesus) similar to those of a shaman? This provocative question is the topic of Ashton's 1998 Wilde Lectures in Natural and Comparative Religion. Departing from the traditional focus on Paul's theology, Ashton concentrates on Paul's religious experience, utilizing the shaman as a heuristic model in his examination of the effect Paul's religious experience had on his life, ministry, and theology. As defined by cultural anthropology, a shaman is one singled out for a particular supernatural gift, which usually involves intense physical and psychological suffering as part of the initiation, followed by a ritual death and rebirth. The initiate is then a person of spiritual power and stature. Ashton examines similarities between the religious experiences of the shaman and those of the Old Testament prophets, various Christian saints, the evangelist Oral Roberts, Paul, and Jesus himself. Several aspects of Paul's life, including his conversion, his mysticism, and his role as an apostle and a prophet, are compared with the model. Related issues, such as Merkabah mysticism, Schweitzer's mysticism, and the historicity of Acts are discussed peripherally in several excurses. His model requires that he swim against the contemporary academic current in his exegesis of several key texts, most notably Rom 7 and 2 Cor 12:1–10, which he interprets as autobiographical descriptions of Paul's religious experience.

Paul's "conversion" on the road to Damascus was a call, the immediacy of which is understood in what came before, during, and after the event. There was much in place in the Judaism of Paul to prepare the way for an opening to the Gentiles in the end times, for Paul understood his call in terms of Second Isaiah. But Paul and his followers believed that Jesus was the leader of this messianic kingdom, and Paul demanded that believers accept the full implications. In his analysis of Paul's mysticism, Ashton examines a number of texts with his model, namely, 2 Cor 12:1–10; Phil 3:7–11; 1 Cor 15:3–8; and Rom 6:1–11; 8:23–30. In these passages Paul uses the language of transformation, new life, and the reversal of values. Ashton holds that Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is the lens through which these passages must be viewed. The weaknesses and adversities that Paul describes are comparable to the shamanistic initiatory death and resurrection experiences. Paul struggles to express his experiences in a conceptual framework conditioned by his own cultural and religious traditions. These descriptions are not theology but "the best way Paul can find of expressing what he now believes: it is the outcome of a raw and unsystematic reflection on the most important religious experience. But what kind of experience? A sort of dying and rising" (126).

Paul also uses the language of spirit-possession to describe the experience of the divided self. For example, in the autobiographical Rom 7:13–25, Paul reifies sin as an independent force residing in him, forcing him to behave contrary to his will. After his conversion experience and his many struggles, he describes himself as having received revelation directly from Christ (Gal 1:15–16). Rather than being possessed by sin, Paul can now describe his state as one in which it is "not I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19–20).

What was the appeal of Paul's missionary efforts and the early Christian movement? The promise of the resurrection and the yearning for immortality are rejected as primary motivations, and here Ashton is correct to point out that pagan religions were similar in many respects in what they offered the believer. Resurrection of the individual believer had not really taken root in the first Christian generation, as is evidenced by Paul's exhortations in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Cor 15. Miracles, exorcisms, and healings were omnipresent in ancient societies and religious groups. Christian manifestations of spiritual power were simply more powerful than those displayed by competing groups. Paul's appeal was simple: his deeds of power and those of his followers showed the weakness and bankruptcy of the pagan gods and demons.

These lectures are challenging, and their strength lies in Ashton's willingness to take the religious experiences of Paul seriously. The religious experiences of the early Christian movement need more study. To call these experiences shamanistic, however, raises more questions. To what degree are human mystical experiences and altered states of consciousness similar across time and culture? It would have been interesting to apply some of the recent studies on the physiology of mystical experience to the texts in

question. The shaman is a *particular* individual called to initiation. Paul's Christian communities were noted for the communal nature of the spiritual gifts. In fact, Paul feels it necessary to defend his spiritual abilities against many competitors. The spiritual gifts in these communities appear to be widely distributed and not given as a special calling or enhancement of power and reputation to specific individuals. Although many of the gifts do bear similarities to those of a shaman, the nonparticular nature of the gifts as described in 1 Corinthians seems to suggest a different model.