

Defending the church's truth claims

2. Sightings

The first followers of Jesus were men and women born in due course of evolution like us

After Jesus was executed by the Romans his followers were in shock. It is a fair guess that they mourned him, and that each individual mourned him in his or her own special way, depending on where he or she was 'coming from'. One old story tells of followers who mourned him because they had hoped that he would throw the occupying Romans out of their country. But each heart had its own reasons for mourning. Then uncanny things started to happen. There were sightings. English-speaking Christians have come to call these sightings 'appearances'.

Who saw him first? It seems that the original pecking order among followers may have been established by who had the first sighting, who the next, and so on. It is not difficult to see how that happened; it seems very human to us. There were competing traditions. Successors of Peter prevailed, and so has the tradition that his sighting came first; but there was an ancient tradition among other followers of Jesus that his brother James had the privilege of the first sighting (Gospel of the Hebrews, recorded by Jerome; RMcL Wilson, New Testament Apocrypha Vol 1, Lutterworth Press, 1963, p. 165). Understandably, the book recording that tradition was not included among the canon of approved books for reading in the churches later fixed in Rome. Rome had no reason to be proud of James, who led the first Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem for a quarter of a century, or more. Many Christians have still have not heard of him even now.

Paul gives us a list of the sightings as he understood the matter in his letter to the Corinthians. (Some think that he has echoes of both traditions in his mind; others suspect that some one else may have slotted in verse 5; but I assume here that Paul wrote all the verses himself). Writing in or about 52 CE, Paul tells the followers in Corinth (as the Greek text now stands): "he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters (Greek 'brothers') at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to

someone untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1 Cor 15. 5–8). (Here and in all following Parts I quote from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible Anglicized Edition Copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. The quotations are used by permission. All rights reserved).

The evidence of Paul. We have firsthand, 'eyewitness' evidence of only one sighting – the sighting by Paul. His was not a typical experience and he was very conscious of that. It was, as far as we know, the only sighting by someone who had not met Jesus in his lifetime, or at least seen or heard him at a distance. Paul wrote, "God....was pleased to reveal his Son to me"; (Gal 1. 15/16). "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Cor 9. 1; both NRSV). The familiar story of Paul's conversion, the bright light, the voice and his subsequent blindness on the road to Damascus, is told three times in 'Acts'; but, as the author explains in his literary prologue to 'Luke', he is not an eyewitness, rather a reporter of tradition. This famous story may or may not be accurate, but it does not come to us direct from Paul. Indeed the natural inference from Paul's use of the word 'return' in Gal 1.17 is that the sighting took place in Damascus. No one knows what 'actually happened' to Paul; but there is nothing unintelligible to our way of thinking in what Paul writes. He had interrogated a good many followers of Jesus by that time; he had 'observed their demeanour', as lawyers say, and heard their 'witness', as Christians say, and, as we might say, 'it suddenly dawned on him' that he was wrong about Jesus and they were right.

Apart from Paul's brief statements in his two letters, it seems that we only have second or third generation accounts of other appearances. It is a feature of more than one of these traditions that the person affected met somebody, whom he or she did not know, in some neutral situation and did not at first suspect that that person was Jesus; one, so the story goes, thought he was the gardener; others only recognised him when he had a meal with them. Nothing unintelligible to us about that.

Others had no direct experience. For them, we may imagine, faith started with the sound of bare feet running, a knock at the door and a friend's voice saying, 'He's alive'. 'Who's alive?' 'Jesus is, Peter's seen him'.

The starting point for faith for each of those followers was in every case an experience, something uncanny; something to make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck.

In Part 3, the response to experience.