

## Defending the church's truth claims

### 3. What's going on?

The apparatus available to us for coming to terms with experience; how meaning gets attached to what we experience, and what the first followers of Jesus understood the meaning of their experience to be

Whatever the true nature of the appearance, we can be confident that in down-to-earth, physiological terms the reaction to it was of this nature: the friend who heard the running feet received auditory and visual stimuli of a potentially alarming nature in the sensory thalamus in his or her brain; the information was then directly passed to the amygdala; his or her instinctive systems of fright and flight were alerted, muscles tensed and pulse rate went up, just in case. Fractionally later, the same information having passed from the sensory thalamus to the cortex and on again to the amygdala, a rational response was formulated. Moment's later the friend started asking himself or herself (in rough Aramaic) 'what's going on here?' And, moments later again, the human brain, being a mechanism for making sense of phenomena, was asking 'what does this mean?' These are what I will call 'human it must have beens', based on current understanding (put somewhat crudely by a non-expert) of how we experience the world around us.

We have the old Greek way of expressing 'what does this mean' in the story about the 'speaking with tongues'; the people who observed that phenomenon asked themselves (so the story goes), 'what does this thing wish to be?' (ti thelei touto einai?) (my translation) ('Acts' 2.12) The Greek makes it clear that already in the first century CE (Common Era = AD) people were aware that facts have no intrinsic 'meaning', it is we who attach meaning to our experience.

There are embedded in Paul's letters phrases which he is clearly quoting from earlier tradition. These phrases give us the earliest glimpses available to us of how the first Jewish followers of Jesus 'made sense' of the experience of Jesus somehow still being with them. When they thought about it and discussed it together those first followers came to the conclusion that 'it must have been because...' Their 'it must have been' was a 'divine it must have been' based on their understanding that the universe in which they lived was under the control of an almighty being.

I have already suggested that the apparatus available to Jesus' followers, with which to solve the puzzle of these sightings, was the regulation evolutionary brain issued to all human beings at birth. It should be equally obvious that the first followers were people of their time, who operated with particular categories and concepts in a frame of reference which we no longer share. They had, for example, no notion of a big bang, or evolution, or UFOs, or IVF. What they did have was a highly nuanced understanding of an almighty being, who had made a covenant with their people and was properly worshipped in the big temple built in Jerusalem. Jesus had shared their understanding of the universe, had spoken profoundly about that almighty being and had claimed that, when he healed

people, he did so by virtue of power given to him by that almighty being. It comes as no surprise that his followers, experiencing that Jesus, who by all ordinary standards ought to be dead, was somehow not dead, attributed this to the almighty being, who 'must have' vindicated Jesus and what he had stood for in his lifetime. That was the primary 'divine it must have been'. Then his followers set about looking into the holy books of the Jews to see if any of the prophets had had anything to say about Jesus. In fact, as things turned out, very few had; but they found just enough for their purposes.

Raised from the dead. Here are two fragments of earlier tradition quoted in Paul's letters: in his first letter to the followers in Salonika, probably written in 50 or 51 CE Paul wrote, "you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming". (1 Thessalonians 1. 9/10 NRSV). In his letter to the Romans, probably written about 57 CE, Paul wrote of the gospel of God, "the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus..." (Romans 1. 2-4 NRSV).

It is widely understood among scholars that Jesus was probably born about 4 BCE (4 BC) and was executed in about 30 CE. Paul's is the earliest evidence we have as to how his first followers made sense of the appearances. Verses 9/10 of the first chapter of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians shows that it was the established traditional understanding of the followers of Jesus 20 years after his death that Jesus had been declared 'son of God' by a mighty act of God in raising him from the dead. Paul shared that understanding.

I will come in Part 5 to what the Hebrew equivalent of the phrase 'son of god' might have meant to them; but in Part 4 I explore the significance for us today of what Paul has written about God 'raising Jesus from the dead'.