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DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY**

**The Revelation on the Road to Damascus: Illusion or Theophany?
- a Lucanic perspective on the text Acts 9:1-30**

-SUMMARY-

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Doctoral thesis with the title "Revelation on the road to Damascus: illusion or theophany?" A Lucanic perspective on the text Acts 9:1-30", contains 162 pages and 12 pages of Bibliography and was developed under the scientific coordination of Prof. Dr. Stelian Tofană, Professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at "Babeş-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca.

The subject addressed, which is intended to be an approach deeply anchored in the biblical text, belongs to the field of New Testament Biblical Theology, and the project aims to create a clear picture and determine whether the event on the road to Damascus was a simple illusion or a theophany. The research project has as its subject the person of the Holy Apostle Paul and is intended to be an exegesis from a historical and biblical perspective of the Lucanic text Acts 9:1-30, but also a comparative analysis with parallel texts Acts 22:4-16 and Acts 26:10-20, which presents the events unfolding during the journey to Damascus, the conversion episode being at the same time attractive, but also confusing, for the uninitiated reader. For this reason, the basis of the development of the subject was the intention to understand the reason why God intervenes in the history of the world through measures that can be perceived as traumatic both by those involved and by the witnesses of such events.

The research act was not only limited to obtaining conclusions resulting from the analysis and interpretation of existing studies, but tried to obtain evidence to confirm or refute the working hypotheses.

The work is structured in five chapters, each with its own subchapters, the focus being on the analysis of the elements that highlight the personality of the Apostle, as follows:

-Chapter I (page 5-11): Presents the considerations that formed the basis of the work. Exegesis of the text Acts 9:1-30 and carrying out a comparative study with the texts presented at Acts 22:4-16 and Acts 26:10-20, represents an analysis of the moment of conversion, an event that determined the appearance of the greatest missionary of the Church. The first part is intended to present the premises from which the research starts, the current state of the research, the motivation and the importance of the chosen theme.

-Chapter II (page 12-50): It deals with particularities that highlight Saul in his capacity as the chief persecutor of Christians. With the appropriation of the Mosaic teachings, Saul of Tarsus became a tireless defender of them and a formidable opponent of those who did not obey the prescriptions of the Law. The chapter analyzes the social and religious context at the time of the appearance of the Christian Church, the situation of the early Church and its organization, and in this context the appearance on the stage of history of the young

Saul of Tarsus, the zealous Jew who, upon receiving the letters of authorization from the Bishop (Acts 9:1-2), becomes a persecutor of Christians in Damascus.

-Chapter III (page 51-122): Determine, based on the research, if the event that happened at the gates of Damascus and that led to the conversion of Saint Paul, was an illusion or a theophany. In a way that he fully assumed he gave up everything, as a result of the intervention of Jesus on his way to Damascus to destroy the Church and its believers. God allows the wicked to reveal their enmity against Him, because acts of cruelty or injustice to the faithful have the same value as if they were directed against Him. Thus, in the context of the previous chapter, Saul meets Christ, which leads to the cessation of persecution, the consequences of the event being particularly favorable for the Church.

-Chapter IV (page 123-157): It presents Saint Paul in his capacity as an Apostle. The act of conversion produces a radical change in Saul, especially in terms of his relationship with God. Thus, the distance between Yahweh and Saul becomes close between Christ and Paul. The Damascus road confronts the old man with the new man. Post-conversion, his inner life is totally reconfigured, acquiring a completely different course, the only reason for existing being that of serving Christ.

-Chapter V (page 158-162): Presents the conclusions that come to complete this double role of Saint Paul, as a persecutor of Christians and as an Apostle of Christendom. The final conclusions indicate that the main objective of the work was to determine the divine character of the episode that led to the radical transformation of the Apostle and that the event was part of the plan of salvation for the human race. The road to Damascus represents the road to another destiny, a destiny marked by the presence of Christ, the experience of meeting him being reflected in his entire theology.

The importance of the topic, in terms of novelty and originality, does not lie in the chosen title, but in the way of re-evaluating the subject. The purpose of the research is to highlight the texts from the Acts of the Apostles, which talk about the wonderful conversion of Saint Paul and to determine the real presence of the Savior Jesus Christ in the episode Acts 9:1-30, as well as in the parallel texts. God directs the events of history and gives them a meaning that goes beyond their primary meaning. The research aims to provide a pertinent answer and a complete picture of the episode that happened near the city of Damascus. In this sense, the achievement of the following objectives was considered:

- analyzing the elements that highlight Saul's personality, in his capacity as a persecutor of Christians;

-identifying and analyzing the elements that led to the conversion of the Apostle Paul;

- the critical analysis of Paul's personality, after the moment of conversion;
- the elaboration of some conclusions that highlight the post-conversion transformation of the Apostle and that constitute an argument against anti-Pauline attitudes, originating from the Jewish or rationalist space;

The theme is motivated by a full understanding of Paul's conversion and to make a thorough x-ray of the moment of conversion, in the sense of detailing the Lucan account, which is a challenge. The theme was treated insufficiently in the Orthodox space, compared to the Protestant one, which offered greater attention to the subject, in the treatment of which the canonical books of the Holy Scriptures were used, especially the exegesis of the text from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Also, in order to achieve the previously stated objectives, biblical dictionaries, encyclopedias, patristic and modern commentaries were used, in order to better understand the biblical text and to observe its multiple meanings.

The works of contemporary theologians occupy a central place within the project, New Testament studies providing additional information for a better understanding of the historical, religious and social context in which the Pauline conversion took place, the multitude of opinions analyzed contributing to the shaping of a complete picture.

The work is circumscribed to the field of New Testament Biblical Theology and therefore the study of the Greek text and the comparative analysis of some translations, value the information obtained. The analytical working method correlates the informational aspect with the perspective of biblical, exegetical theology and the history of Judaism, aiming for the interpretation of information to be carried out in the sphere of scientific objectivity. In addition, in order to achieve the element of objectivity, exegetical and comparative research methods were also used in the paper, which aimed to highlight and argue the main ideas of the thesis.

The text that presents Saul's journey to Damascus was analyzed using the Nestle-Aland critical edition of the Novum Testamentum Graece, but also different editions of The Holy Bible: King James Version, New International Version, American Standard Version, English Standard Version, and for the text in Romanian, the Bible or the Holy Scripture was used, printed in 1994. The translations are useful in the act of interpretation and offer multiple meanings to the analyzed passage. The consultation of several versions offered the possibility of ascertaining whether the meaning of the different translations agrees or whether there are

several possibilities to express what the hagiographer intended to convey. The comparative analysis of several versions meant avoiding issuing theses based on a single hypothesis.

Treated in part by some biblical scholars, the current state of research is not very advanced, since most of them have analyzed only the general details of the Apostle's life, most of them paying more attention to Pauline theology. Several researchers have tried, over time, to interpret the elements that were the basis of Saint Paul's conversion and to offer a scientifically argued, but also theologically complex explanation, regarding the Lucanic account contained in Acts 9:1-30.

In the Romanian theological space there is relatively little information related to this subject. Sabin Verzan, Teodor M. Popescu or Radu Diac are the most representative of the Romanian theologians who wrote on the subject of the conversion of the Apostle Paul. Often only the event is described, and only some aspects considered to be essential for interested readers are briefly treated, the authors briefly dealing with the passages that most caught their attention, according to their exegetical concerns and goals.

Sabin Verzan in the work entitled *Saint Paul the Apostle*. The history of the preaching of the Gospel and the organization of the Church in the apostolic age, presents in the form of a monograph, the life and activity of Saint Paul, called to the apostolic work by Christ the Savior Himself. In the first part of the work, the author analyzes all those aspects that led to the formation of the personality of the great Apostle: birth, family, education, pose as a persecutor, conversion and preparation for assuming the apostolic mission. The author insists on the idea that the Apostle's missionary work is the result of communion with the Savior Christ, a communion that began with the moment of conversion.

In the work *Saint Paul the Apostle of the Gentiles*, Professor Teodor M. Popescu presents Saint Paul from the perspective of the persecutor who became an apostle. The secret of his calling and power is the meeting with Christ on the road to Damascus. Confronted by Jesus, he was blinded and thrown to the ground, only to be raised up in His love, light and grace. Conversion meant the birth of a new man, with a new purpose, which was diametrically opposed to that of the old man, Saul. The sudden and unexpected call transformed Saul permanently and completely. Through all his missionary activity, Paul strengthened his dignity as a called Apostle of Christ, continuously and unequivocally confessing the sin of persecution and his nothingness as a man. In the book *Life of the Holy Apostle Paul*, Radu Diac renews knowledge about the Apostle of the Gentiles, who by word, deed and writing became one of the most active disciples of the Lord. The author reiterates the idea that Saint Paul, whose life was changed by conversion, is still relevant today.

Due to the limited bibliography from the Romanian theological space, an appeal was made to biblical commentaries from Western theology, which deepened and developed the theme of Pauline conversion. Craig Keener in *Acts. An Exegetical Commentary: 3:1-14:28*, makes a thorough exegetical study of the event on the road to Damascus, highlighting the wonderful way in which the Lord intervened in the life of the Apostle. The author offers his own theological perspective on the event, which he circumscribes in the history of Judaism.

Paul, the Apostle of Jesus the Messiah, the work of the Anglican theologian N.T. Wright, presents itself as a biography of Saint Paul. The author directs his attention to the subject, following on the one hand the evolution of the Apostle from Judaism to Christianity, and on the other hand the way in which his prodigious missionary activity was carried out. The subject of Saint Paul's conversion was also addressed by Daniel Marguerat, Richard Peace, Howard Marshall, Bradley Chance or Ajith Fernando, authors who treated the subject only partially and not exhaustively, highlighting the divine presence in the episode on the road to Damascus .

The research project aimed to pay particular attention to the analysis of the sacred text, in an attempt to discover new theological meanings and to elucidate the mystery surrounding Saul's journey to Damascus. The work also has an apologetic character, through the final content trying to offer a scientifically and theologically reasoned answer to those who challenge the New Testament biblical text and at the same time to make its own contribution to the specialized theological literature.

The bibliography is rich and includes different editions of the Holy Scriptures, patristic and modern biblical commentaries, to which is added a multitude of studies, articles, dictionaries and encyclopedias, with a total of approximately 300 titles.

Keywords: *Jesus, Apostle, Paul, Damascus, Jerusalem, revelation, theophany, illusion*