Paul didn’t go to the 3d Heaven

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In II Cor. 11:16, Paul states:  “I say again, Let no man think me a fool; if otherwise, yet as a fool receive me, that I may boast myself a little.”  He then spends 17 verses talking about God’s work through him and his credentials as a Jew and as an Apostle.  Then, without skipping a beat, chapter 12 begins with:  “It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.”

Those seeking to lead the church of Corinth astray had been boasting about their credentials, so Paul admits embarrassingly that he is boasting and glorying.  “Howbeit whereinsoever any is bold, (I speak foolishly,) I am bold also.”  II Cor. 11:21b.  But Paul did it for the sake of the people at the Church of Corinth, who were being led astray by slanderers of Paul.  “And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!”  II Cor. 11:11.

Paul’s theme is “Don’t be led astray.  Those slanderers have not greater authority than I have.”  The points of Paul’s passage supporting his theme are:  The Corinthians listen to these fleshly teachers because they have credentials that man looks upon as impressive; the more important fact of God’s calling and what that means – suffering; and Paul’s love for these believers and his own reputation for trustworthiness.  The last thing Paul would have wanted to do was appear duplicitous and as if he was hiding something.  That would have been completely opposed to the very purpose he had in speaking about himself. He admitted that he was speaking more openly than he wanted to in this passage because, knowing humility is critical to living before the Almighty God in good conscience, he didn’t like to boast.  But he was saying more than he normally would for the sake of the Corinthians. To say he suddenly switched gears and began speaking opaquely would be contrary to the purpose he himself stated he had in writing the passage.  Also, Paul was not a liar.

Some interpreters claim Paul is really referring to himself and an experience he had.[[1]](#footnote-1)  Why would people see the need to attribute the following statements as applying to a personal experience of Paul’s?

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.  On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.

II Cor. 12:1-6.  Paul is spending almost two entire chapters of his discussion talking about himself, apologizing for speaking so openly as if he’s boasting, and explaining that the fleshly teachers and the church’s acceptance of them have caused him to go to such lengths.

Then he changes course and explains that he knows a man in Christ who had a glorious experience.  He says, “On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.” He says again, “On behalf of this man I will boast.” He had been boasting about himself, and in opposition to Paul’s boasting about his fleshly pedigree as a Jew and his accomplishments as an evangelist, he now describes something that he can boast about freely and without apology – someone being gifted with an amazing experience by God, totally unearned, totally spiritual, and totally by God’s grace. But it doesn’t have to be Paul. He is contrasting the boasting of chapter 11 with the experience of chapter 12. The latter he can boast about freely for two reasons – the utter spiritual gifting by God and the fact it happened to someone else.

If Paul was being cagey about an experience he had, there are several serious problems with that idea.  First and most seriously, that interpretation means he’s lying to the reader. He has just spent nearly an entire chapter explaining why he’s being even more open in talking about himself, but now he’s going to go in the complete opposite direction and pretend he’s talking about himself by talking about someone else.  In addition to slander of Paul, it’s simply illogical when looked at in context.

Second, because Paul is considered an inspired writer, the interpretation means that an inspired writer can be deceptive in that writing and it still be considered divine writ.  This is very different from the rest of the bible, wherein the sins of people are exposed in the writing.  Yes, Genesis reveals that Laban lied and deceived Jacob by sending cattle that rightfully belonged to Jacob and pretending there were no such cattle in Laban’s flock. Gen. 30:34-6.  However, that’s very different from Moses adopting some form of false humility in writing Gen. 33:11 and saying something like:  “And Moses knew of a man who spoke with God face to face, as if they were friends.”  That would raise the question:  “Why did you deceive us, Moses?”  Answer:  “Ah, shucks, I didn’t want you thinking I was that important.”  Our concern:  “And this deception on your part was ‘divinely inspired?’ Say it ain’t so.”

It ain’t so.  Not for Moses and not for Paul.

The third problem is our celebrity culture in the Christian world.  Yes, we actually believe that there could have been no other person in the first century, to whom God would reveal something amazing, except the Apostles.  We idolize Paul so much that we refuse to believe it wasn’t him that went to the third heaven.  This is a carnal position that Paul himself attacked in his first epistle to the Corinthians.

What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.

I Cor. 1:12-15.

I’m not in the Paul cult; I’m in the Church, where God distributes His gifts according to His own choosing. And he sometimes chooses the least impressive of us to give His amazing gifts. One member, no matter his position, is no better than another in God’s economy.  Paul was clear that he was not anything.  “Who is Appollos?  Who is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.” I Cor. 3:5.  God can choose anyone He’d like to go to the third heaven and see and hear unspeakable things.  In this case, Paul tells me explicitly that it was not him, as opposed to what he’d been relating up till that point in his discussion.  I accept that for two reasons:  Paul had integrity, and he was an inspired writer of the scripture.

But you might argue, “How does someone else’s experience support Paul’s defense of his own election by God as an apostle?” That question highlights the fourth problem with the interpretation that Paul was referring to himself. Remember that his argument is not just that Paul is qualified but that the fleshly teachers are not qualified. Paul is trying to get across to the Corinthians, not just not just his own qualifications but throughout the entire epistle the critical point: God’s qualifications of a person are so very different from man’s. A letter of recommendation from a man as to someone’s qualifications cannot hold a candle to God’s choosing.

But where’s the evidence of God’s choosing? Is it a letter of recommendation? A halo over someone’s head? A commanding and impressive presence? No, none of these will commend a man as God’s man. Paul says that he can’t even commend himself. That’s another reason he apologizes more than once for even attempting to prove his qualifications to the Corinthians. But this man that Paul knows has had an experience of purely personal blessing from the Almighty God, who has even trusted this man with words and visions that God wants kept secret. God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, wanted to give this other man some kind of blessing simply because he loved him. It reminds me of Enoch mentioned in Genesis 5: “And Enoch walked with God and was not, for God took him.” Gen. 5:24.

Paul contrasted himself with this man. Paul was a former persecutor and blasphemer, called by God to suffer, who lived for no reason but that others might hear the gospel. Acts 9:15-16; I Tim. 1:12-14. Paul’s revelations were not for him; they were for broadcasting to the entire world. Paul considered himself a bondslave of God, serving purely for others’ sake. Paul is saying, “I can’t boast about my ministry because nothing I do is some type of gifting from God as his friend; I’m his slave. This other man has such a relationship with God that God wants to bless him with revelation of himself and of his heaven just to bless him and no one else.” Paul can freely boast about this man because he’s not Paul and his blessing is so different from the revelations Paul received. This man’s experience also highlights the utter insignificance of the fleshly teachers’ credentials; theirs can’t stand up against the qualification of this other man who has no evidence of his qualification. If you conflate Paul with this other unnamed man, you lose most of the message that Paul is trying to get across.

So, let’s not accuse Paul of being a liar or being falsely humble, let’s not undermine the integrity of the inspired text, let’s keep the entire message that Paul was trying to get across, and let’s not be a groupy for some Paul cult which Paul himself would slap down.  Let’s take the bible for what it says and in the context in which it is stated. Let’s learn the lessons of true spirituality which Paul tried to teach the Corinthians and of God’s sovereign choosing as to gifts and positions within His kingdom.

1. If you check the interpreters’ reasons for attributing the experience to Paul, you’ll find them woefully weak and based on bare grammatical elements, like using third person or the word “knew” instead of “know” in the KJV. They also claim the “surpassing revelations” of II Cor. 12:7 refers to this experience. But do we need some new revelation that occurred in some 3d heaven to understand that Paul had great revelations as an Apostle? No. Whatever merit there is in these tools of interpretation, they are not more important Paul’s integrity as an Apostle and the inspiration of the scriptures. And I believe there’s some form of favoritism toward Paul that is biasing these interpreters. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)