

Is Ananias also among the prophets?

1. The calling of Saul

At the 2010 meeting of this seminar in Sir Gladstone's Library in Hawarden, I have delivered a paper on the calling of Saul in Acts 9 under the title 'Bibliodrama in Acts'. In that paper I have tried to maintain the possibility that the narrative about Saul on his way to Damascus is intentionally referring to the David-and-Saul narrative in 1 Samuel 26. There, king Saul chasing God's newly anointed one, David, hears the latter's voice from above calling him and asking: why do you persecute me? In Acts, Saulos is called twice by the Hebrew name Saoul. He hears the same question, and the speaker identifies himself as Jesus, who in Luke-Acts is presented regularly as David's son and heir. My suggestion was that the narrative in Acts shows the newtestamentical Saul finding himself all of a sudden in the role of his oldtestamentical namesake. Judging until then that he was fighting on the right side, he suddenly finds himself on the wrong side – and by his own standards at that time, people on the wrong side should be wiped out. But Saul lives his three days of darkness in Damascus to learn that by God's standards he may live and become a vessel of the good news. I have suggested that this sudden and total shift in role and judgment, finding himself in the role of the villain and finding God to give him full credit for a new life, is at the core of the apostle's message ever after. The narrative in Acts 9 is not necessarily a historically accurate report of what has happened to Paul, but it is, in my opinion, an accurate way to describe the radical shift in Paul's life by narrative means.

2. The calling of Ananias

But now, leaning back as it were, feeling that I had deciphered Saul's calling, I caught sight of Ananias. In my mind, and in many minds, I suppose, he had always been a very minor and merely instrumental character in the story about Saul.

However, if we just count the words of Acts 9,1-18, from Saul the prosecutor to his being baptized and regaining strength – 164 out of 330 words (half minus 1) are about Ananias being called and doing what he is called to do. What is more: the narrative does not stay with Saul. It would have been perfectly possible to tell the whole story from the perspective of an observer in Saul's place, so that we would have Ananias coming in and telling what had brought him here. But from verse 10, the narrator has left Saul on his own to be present with Ananias. It is together with Ananias that he returns to Saul's place, and only in verse 18 the story line switches back from Ananias to Saul as the main character.

In fact, Acts 9,1-18 is shaped as a convergence of two separate callings, both characters being called by their names by the Lord and being led to an encounter. Even before they meet, they are linked to each other by a double vision in which both are being prepared for the encounter with each other.

Of course, Saul remains the more important character. Whereas Ananias's part in the book of Acts is confined to these very verses, Saul (or Paul) will turn out to be the most prominent human character of the book. But still, the character of Ananias is not merely instrumental in the story of the apostle of the gentiles. There is, I believe, a message in the way his calling is presented, as a calling parallel to that of Saul himself. And whereas the calling of Saul is narrated so as to bring our minds the OT narrative about the mad king Saul persecuting the newly anointed one, David – the calling of Ananias seems to allude to quite another range of OT narratives.

The calling of Saul is a complex story: first, he is merely stopped in his tracks, in a way that has (as far as I can see) no parallels in biblical calling stories (the OT Saul story it seems to allude to is not a calling narrative). Then the calling of Ananias leads to Saul receiving his mission after three days of darkness – perhaps the three days are meant to make an analogy with Jesus' death and resurrection, which would be quite Paulinic: having the old ways of Saul die, and having him rise to a new life and mission after three days.

But in order to make this new life and mission possible, Ananias has to be called. And his calling narrative in verses 10-16 is not at all unique – it has several features in common with OT calling stories. In the abstract I referred to prophetic call narratives, having in mind that Ananias answers the Lord’s call with due reverence, but is rather reluctant to accept his mission. Without refusing straightforwardly, like Moses and Jeremiah he tries to explain that this mission is not a good idea, but again like them, after the Lord’s reply he does obediently what is asked from him.

Apart from this prophetic feature, there is a resemblance in the opening sentences with two texts in Genesis. In Genesis 22,1 we read in the LXX text:

Καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα ὁ θεὸς ἐπείραζεν τὸν Ἀβραάμ καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν
Ἀβραάμ, Ἀβραάμ· ὁ δὲ εἶπεν Ἰδοὺ ἐγώ.

And in Genesis 46,2 we read:

εἶπεν δὲ ὁ θεὸς Ἰσραὴλ ἐν ὁράματι τῆς νυκτὸς εἶπας Ἰακώβ, Ἰακώβ. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν Τί ἐστίν; -
Jacob’s reply in Hebrew, *hinneni*, would allow for Ἰδοὺ ἐγώ in this instance as well.

In these texts, God calls Abraham and Jacob to act in a way that seems to endanger the life and future of God’s people (by sacrificing Isaac, or by evacuating all descendants of Israel to Egypt). I think this might be an important feature, because Ananias, too, is called to act in a way that seems to endanger the life and future of God’s people. That is why he objects in the way he does.

Another narrative that comes to mind is that of the calling of Samuel in 1Sam3, where Samuel is said to say Ἰδοὺ ἐγώ five times when his name is called. The only OT parallel for the complete sentence Ἰδοὺ ἐγώ, κύριε is from the LXX version of the beginning of the Samuel narrative in 1Sam1,8, but there it is Hannah replying to her husband:

καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ Ἐλκανα ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς
Ἄννα.
καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ
Ἰδοὺ ἐγώ, κύριε.
καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ
Τί ἐστίν σοι, ὅτι κλαίεις;

Apart from possible OT parallels, it is interesting to compare both callings in Acts 9.

<p>λέγουσαν αὐτῷ, Σαοὺλ Σαοὺλ, τί με διώκεις; ⁵εἶπεν δέ, Τίς εἶ, κύριε; ὁ δέ, Ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς ὃν σὺ διώκεις; ⁶ἀλλὰ ἀνάστηθι καὶ εἰσελθε</p>	<p>καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν ἐν ὁράματι ὁ κύριος, Ἄνανια. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν, Ἰδοὺ ἐγώ, κύριε. ¹¹ὁ δὲ κύριος πρὸς αὐτόν, Ἄναστὰς πορεύθητι</p>
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Both Saul and Ananias are called by their names, although it is Saul and not Ananias whose Hebrew name is called twice, like that of Abraham, Jacob and Samuel in the passages just quoted. There is a beautiful contrast in the first reactions of Saul and Ananias (*Who are you versus Here I am*), making Saul the outsider and Ananias the insider in things concerning the Lord. Both times, the message of the Lord is introduced without a verb (ὁ δὲ and ὁ δὲ κύριος), and in both cases the instruction begins with the command to rise and go.

My guess is that the author of Acts 9 has deliberately created this analogy between the callings of the outsider and the insider. Ananias may be in the good company of patriarchs and prophets, whereas Saul finds himself in the doubtful company of his erring namesake – but both have to be called by name and told to rise and go. Without a separate calling of the disciple, the ways of Saul and the church would not have come together.

For my guess that this notion is part of the author’s program, I find confirmation in the next chapter of Acts, where a double vision brings Cornelius and Peter together, the Roman centurion and the apostle of Christ. If conversion ever is the right word, a conversion takes place at both sides: the

outsider turns toward the church, and a representative of the church turns toward the outsider. It is a telling feature of these texts that it takes as much an intervention of the Lord to have the Christian turn around and receive the outsider, as it takes to bring the outsider inside.

3. Double vision, two-stage calling

In both Acts 9 and Acts 10, the double vision seems a powerful means to persuade the disciple, or the apostle, into receiving the outsider. In Acts 9, the double vision is introduced in the Lord's words to Ananias, in a way that makes Ananias' mission a *fait accompli* even before he has had the occasion to object. The Lord tells Ananias that Saul already has seen him, Ananias, with name and all, coming to bless him and have his vision restored. Visions, or revelatory dreams, seem not so much a gift of grace in Acts, as a *tour de force* to make disciples of Christ do what they would not do otherwise. Ananias and Saul already have their business cards exchanged in their dreams, so Ananias has no choice, but go and make happen what has already been seen to happen.

The callings of Saul and Ananias are, of course, not strictly paralleled – Ananias is called to call lay his hands on Saul, to complete as it were the calling of Saul. The calling of Ananias is a story within the story of the calling of Saul. But then, the calling of Saul is, in the Lukan narrative program, a story within the calling of all nations. That is what the Lord tells Ananias to make him go to Saul: *for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel* (KJV, Acts 9:15).

This telescopic, or two-stage, quality of God's call is, by definition, a common feature of all prophetic and apostolic call narratives in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures: God calls people to call people – only in Acts 9 this two-stage rocket is extended into a three-stage missile. Ananias is called to call Saul to call the nations to faith in Jesus. Already in verse 20, immediately (εὐθέως), Saul is beginning to do so.

4. Having heard & being shown

It is interesting to note the use of the visual and auditive terminology in Acts 9. In biblical theology, a lot has been made out of Paul's words about faith coming by hearing (words from Paul in Romans 10:17), of course in conjunction with the idea of the Word as the principle of creation, as well as with the biblical prohibition to make an image of the Eternal One. In biblical texts, as I see it, there is often no clear division between the visual and the auditory. In Acts 9, visual terminology outweighs the auditory. Even the blind Saul sees: the Lord tells Ananias that Saul has seen a man called Ananias coming to him – in a vision, as most but not all textual witnesses add. In the first half of the pericope, it is the light from heaven that makes Saul fall down, and it is the voice that makes him stand up, but then he has no sight, whereas his company has not seen anything. Still, later on in verse 17 Ananias will refer to Jesus having made himself seen to Saul on the road. The voice tells him that he will told what to do – but Ananias is sent to him, according to verses 11 and 17, first of all to restore his sight – and when Ananias objects to his mission referring to what he has heard about Saul, the Lord prompts him to nevertheless do as he is told, because of what He will show Saul.

This latter feature, Ananias having heard and the Lord saying that he will show, is part of a more or less chiasmic structure in Ananias' objection and the Lord's reply. The structure seems to offer an image of a reversal that, in my opinion, belongs to the very essence of this narrative:

ἀπεκρίθη δὲ Ἀνανίας,
 Κύριε,
 ἤκουσα ἀπὸ πολλῶν περὶ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τούτου,
 ὅσα κακὰ τοῖς ἀγίοις σου ἐποίησεν ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ:
 --
 καὶ ὧδε ἔχει ἐξουσίαν παρὰ τῶν ἀρχιερέων
 δῆσαι πάντας τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους τὸ ὄνομά σου.

εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος,
 Πορεύου,
 ὅτι σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς ἐστίν μοι οὗτος
 τοῦ βαστάσαι τὸ ὄνομά μου
 ἐνώπιον ἐθνῶν τε καὶ βασιλέων υἱῶν τε Ἰσραήλ:
 --
 ἐγὼ γὰρ ὑποδείξω αὐτῷ
 ὅσα δεῖ αὐτὸν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματός μου παθεῖν.

The expression ἤκουσα ὅσα (I have heard how much) in Ananias' first sentence is mirrored by ὑποδείξω ὅσα (I will show how much) in the Lord's last sentence. Both sentences are about suffering, inflicted by Saul in Ananias' words, and suffered by Saul himself in the Lord's reply. But Saul will not suffer in retribution, as the enemy who finally will have to pay for his evil deeds – he will suffer as one of those whom he has made to suffer until now. That is how the second sentence of Ananias' objection is mirrored by the first sentence of the Lord's reply: the one who has been chasing all those invoking the name of Jesus, is the choice vessel to bring that same name before all those who do not yet invoke it. Between what Ananias has heard and what the Lord will show there is a divide of three days of darkness and prayer – reflecting in the author's mind, I guess, the divide between Jesus' death and resurrection.

5. Outside & inside

According to the narrative of Acts 9, Saul is stopped in his tracks in a dramatic way that evokes the way in which old king Saul is confronted with his madness and the wrongness of his chasing after God's chosen one. The Saul of Acts, seeing this analogy, would have expected that his game is over now – in his conviction, those who are on the wrong side deserve persecution, they should be wiped out. Now not only Saul, but also Ananias learns that exactly the one who has found himself at the wrong side will be the choice bearer of the right message – he will know like no one what it is like to live in grace.

For me as a minister in the church, it is important to note that in Acts 9, Saul is stopped in his tracks outside the church. He will not be the kind of convert the church can to boast of. A man of the church has to be called separately, and won over by the Lord, to go out to him and let him in.

Not long ago I heard a Tilburg professor in the Culture Studies department, Eric Borgman, lecturing for future ministers, say that the church has to go out into the world in order to find God, because God is at work over there, and the church is invited to come and see, to welcome and celebrate. Acts 9 would be a nice example of that.

Saul is stopped in his tracks not merely outside of the church - the narrative locates the encounter somewhere in the open. When I studied the biblical narratives about encounters at a well (a man and a maiden finding each other at a well) for my dissertation, this occurred to be a significant feature of those narratives, both in the Bible and in other traditions – that the encounters took place in the open, whereas afterwards the engagement between those two had to be negotiated in town, in the familial and social contexts that would cause all kinds of trouble and delay. Then, I argued that in the case of John 4 (Jesus & the Samaritan woman) this topological scheme served as an assertion that

the decisive encounters with the Lord may not take place under the eyes of the apostles and within their control – the disciples of Christ are invited (there in John 4) to accept and celebrate the harvest for which they themselves have not labored, instead of opposing to what has happened without their presence. The double calling in Acts 9 might reflect a similar critical attitude towards a Christian community that, even in those early days, tended to be so much more narrowminded and introvert than its Lord.

Piet van Veldhuizen

Geertruid Pijnsenhof 14
3342GN Hendrik-Ido-Ambacht

+31 6 3830 4109

pveldhuizen@gmail.com

www.woordenmetzielen.nl

www.dearkonline.nl

