VISIONS AND REVELATIONS OF THE LORD
(2 CORINTHIANS 12:1–10)

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Margaret is not only the gentlest, most generous and humblest of my friends and colleagues; she is also a formidably learned, careful and balanced exegete. Her ICC commentary on II Corinthians has taken more than two decades to write, and it will stand for at least a century. It is a treasure-chest of things old and new; wheat is regularly sifted from chaff; and no one enjoys disagreeing with it. But over the difficult and important passage 2 Cor 12:1–10 she breaks a lance with me, and a response here may be a testimony to the seriousness with which I treat her comments. What is so nice is that her fair-minded criticisms have forced me to reconsider, improve, and now to restate my solution.

Our disagreement here is considerable. Margaret thinks (with almost all critics, alive and dead) that the “man in Christ” who is ravished to heaven is Paul, and I do not. She has discussed the matter in a paper given to the Leuven Colloquium in 1994,¹ and in the second volume of her commentary, pp. 772–832.² I will treat the issue in three parts. First I will reproduce Margaret’s translation with brief glosses summarizing her own interpretations, taken from her exegesis; and will append a series of questions which are raised by this exposition. Then I will offer my own alternative view, with some responses to Margaret’s criticisms. Finally I will try to broaden the discussion, so as to show that my own perspective is the more plausible.

(1) Margaret’s Interpretation

“Boasting is necessary”, in order to counter a further attack on Paul’s apostolic authority. “It is not expedient, but I will come to visions

and revelations of the Lord”—two words covering the same experiences, visions of Christ, since it has been alleged that he had none. “I know a man in Christ” (a Christian); Paul is speaking of himself, but uses the third person, partly because in such an ecstasy there is a sense of self-transcendence, and partly also to avoid giving the impression of egocentric arrogance. “Fourteen years ago” is specified partly for factuality; but partly perhaps because the vision had been associated with the first coming of the thorn in the flesh.

“Whether in the body I do not know or out of the body I do not know (God knows)”: Jewish visionaries sometimes seem ambivalent, e.g. 1 Enoch 71:1–5, and Paul shares this ambivalence. “That such a man was caught up to the third heaven”, that is the highest heaven, as we find in the Testament of Levi 2–3 (α-text), before the sevenfold heaven schema became normative. “And I know that such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I know not (God knows)”: the same single experience is described in almost identical words. “That he was caught up to paradise”, that is to the third heaven, as in 2 Enoch 8:1. There stood the divine Throne, and Paul will have seen the Glory of God in the form of Christ (cf. 4:6). “And heard unutterable words, which it is not lawful for a man to speak”: that is the name of God, perhaps sung repeatedly by the angels, or some such divine mysteries. “On behalf of such a person I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast”, again distancing himself from the transcendent person of the rapture. “Except of my weaknesses”: Paul goes on to speak of “the extraordinary quality of the revelations” he had had, in consequence of which God had given him the thorn, to humble him.

This seems to me as strong a case as can be made for the standard interpretation, but it raises a number of questions: –

(i) Is it plausible that Paul’s critics could have said, “And furthermore he has had no visionary experiences of Christ”? Would Paul not have been expected immediately to reply, “No visionary experiences! I have seen the Lord! I was one of the original apostolic witnesses to whom the risen Christ appeared! You have known this from the beginning” (1 Cor 9:2; 15:8). As in fact Paul does not make this reply, he clearly understood ὑπερασπισθα καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου to mean something different.

(ii) The use of modern psychology is appealing, to explain the “man in Christ”, but it is flawed in the context. It truly is a skilled business to “boast” without giving the impression of egocentric arrogance;