



# Divine Initiative and the Christology of the Damascus Road Encounter:

*Timothy W. R. Churchill*

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The Damascus road encounter between Jesus and Paul is foundational to understanding the early development of Christology, and, indeed, Christianity, since it is the first appearance of the post-ascension Jesus contained in the earliest Christian literature. This study examines the encounter as it is described in Paul's epistles and the book of Acts. Since Paul interprets his experience within the Jewish tradition, this study begins with a survey of epiphany texts in the Old Testament and other ancient Jewish literature. This reveals two new categories for appearances of God, angels, and other heavenly beings: Divine Initiative and Divine Response. This survey also finds two distinct patterns of characterization for God and other heavenly beings. These findings are then applied to Paul's accounts of his Damascus road encounter. Paul depicts the encounter as a Divine Initiative epiphany. This conclusion is significant, since it argues against the current view that the encounter was a merkabah vision. Paul's Christology in the Damascus road encounter is also significant, since Jesus is characterized as divine. Such divine characterization is not typical for heavenly beings in first-century CE epiphany texts. Thus, a high Pauline Christology appears to be present at a very early point. The three accounts of the Damascus road encounter in Acts also fit the pattern of Divine Initiative-not merkabah-and exhibit the high Christology of Paul's accounts. In fact, the three accounts in Acts are shown to form an intentionally increasing sequence culminating in the revelation that Paul was called to be an apostle by Jesus himself on the Damascus road.

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