

PAUL'S CONVERSION AND LUKE'S PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTER IN ACTS 8–10

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Summary

Luke's portrait of Saul shows him to lack a right relationship with God. This is accomplished in part by contrasting the pre-conversion Saul with Stephen, the Ethiopian eunuch, and Cornelius. After his experience on the Damascus road, Paul is portrayed in ways that resemble Stephen and Peter, while Bar Jesus and the Philippian gaoler, who clearly oppose God and Christianity, are portrayed in ways that recall the earlier portrait of Saul and inform how we are to understand him pre-conversion. Thus Luke connects opposition to the church with opposition to God, and shows that Saul, in opposing the former, was an enemy of the latter. By showing the change from an enemy to one who himself suffers for the gospel, Luke indicates that Paul has entered into a relationship with God. This suggests, furthermore, that Paul joined an already established movement.

I. Introduction

The debate that began in 1963 with Krister Stendahl's suggestion that Paul was not converted, that the Damascus Road experience was a call to ministry, and that Paul's conscience was sufficiently 'robust' to exclude the need for conversion to a new religion, continues unabated.¹ Often those who deny that Paul was converted insist on the impossibility of moving from Judaism to Christianity since the latter did not yet exist.²

¹ See esp. K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles—And Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 7–23. The foundations of his position had already been laid with his speech/article, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', *HTR* 56 (1963) 199–215.

² See, e.g., J. Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 76. He argues that details within the text such as the use of the term 'the

When Stendahl challenged the notion that Paul underwent conversion, data concerning Paul were thought best derived from his epistles, with Acts deemed less reliable. Estimations of Acts have changed, however, since the 1960s.³ Furthermore, developments in methodology demand greater attention to the narrative shape of a work. Given this changed environment, it seems appropriate to hear Luke's voice with respect to the question of Paul's conversion. This article will therefore examine Luke's presentation of character and group affiliation in the hope that in so doing, and without attending to the question of Paul's conscience, it can contribute something to the ongoing discussion.

II. Analogies with Paul's Conversion

Stendahl challenges the appropriateness of conversion language because Paul has not changed religions, that is, he never turns from loyalties to the God with which he began. This invites us to ask who, then, is converted. While the answer might seem clear enough, working with Stendahl's assumptions complicates the task; and furthermore, Luke nowhere explicitly defines conversion, nor provides a consistent pattern of entry into the church. When he does specify the means by which one joins the group, he is generally rounding out narrative portions which demonstrate the overarching effects of preaching.⁴ He does, however, offer sufficient material for us at least to consider the nature of a changed relationship with God, and ask whether the change constitutes conversion. To this we now turn by probing the three characters who have a life-changing encounter with Jesus in Acts 8–10, with an eye to the narrative flow and Luke's presentation of those who respond to the gospel.

way', indicate that followers of Jesus were 'conscious of following a new path', rather than joining a new religion.

³ Thanks in large part to, though by no means exclusively because of, the efforts of scholars such as Colin Hemer, F.F. Bruce, Martin Hengel, and more recently, contributors to the Eerdmans series, *Acts in Its First Century Setting*.

⁴ M. Reasoner, 'The Theme of Acts: Institutional History or Divine Necessity in History?', *JBL* 118 (1999) 635–59, esp. 639. He offers similarities between Acts 16:3 and 21:21 to illustrate. As E. Haenchen (*The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1971], 94, cited by Reasoner, 639) observes, Luke does not 'provide any systematic teaching on how one becomes a Christian; we can only gather certain essentials from a mass of scenes and separate statements'.

A. *The Ethiopian Eunuch*

The Old Testament portrays Ethiopians as economically and militarily powerful, and destined in the future to employ their assets in worshipping Israel's God.⁵ Likewise, Luke describes this particular Ethiopian as a 'court official' who oversees the 'whole treasury' of his queen (8:27),⁶ undertakes a pilgrimage from the 'ends of the earth'⁷ by chariot and with servants (8:28, 38), and apparently owns the scroll from which he reads.⁸

But once the story is underway, and after a full description of the man (8:27–28), Luke consistently and repeatedly refers to him as 'the eunuch'. Some argue that this designation asserts his status as courtier, without implication for physical features. By using another word for 'official' (δυναστής) in 8:27, however, Luke distinguishes between condition and position. Furthermore, according to Plutarch, 'kings ... were generally accustomed to [having] eunuchs as guardians of the treasury'.⁹ The eunuch's station as treasurer and servant to a queen suggest that he was both a man of position and a physical eunuch.¹⁰

Four times in just a few verses (8:27, 34, 38, 39), Luke refers to 'the eunuch', substituting this designation for the name we never learn, thereby emphasising that feature which though contributing to his stature at home, would have met with derision in Jerusalem. Castrated males were regarded as impure and beneath contempt, the Torah declaring that 'No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord' (Dt. 23:1). Philo designates eunuchs 'worthless persons' who have no place in the assembly because they 'debase the currency of nature and violate it by assuming the passions and outward form of licentious women'.¹¹ Josephus instructs that they be 'driven away, as if they had killed their

⁵ 2 Ch. 13:9–13; Jb 28:19; Ps. 68:31–32; Is. 45:14; Zp. 3:9–10. For secular views of Ethiopians, see *Odyssey* 1.22–23; Strabo 17.2.1–3; Herodotus 3.17–20.

⁶ The purpose of the visit is discussed in D.R. Schwartz, 'On Sacrifice by Gentiles in the Temple of Jerusalem', in *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity* (WUNT 60; Tübingen: Mohr, 1992), 102–116. See also the helpful discussion of Jewish 'sympathisers' in M. Hengel, and A.M. Schwemer, *Paul between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox, 1997), 61–73.

⁷ Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.25.114; Strabo, *Geog.* 1.1.6; 1.2.24; Philostratus, *Vita Apoll.* 6.1; cf. *Odyssey* 1.23. Cited in B. Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 290.

⁸ C.W. Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith* (WUNT 2:108; Tübingen: Mohr, 1999), 147; F.S. Spencer, *Acts* (Sheffield: SAP, 1997), 92.

⁹ Plutarch, *Demetrius*, 25.5, as cited in Bruce, *Acts*, 175 n. 62.

¹⁰ Spencer, *Acts*, 93; C.K. Barrett, *Acts* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 1:425.

¹¹ Philo, *Special Laws* 1.324–25.

children', and that they not be conversed with, but detested, as befits all things of a 'monstrous nature'.¹² Despite his wealth and reverence for things holy, the religious community in Jerusalem would consider this foreign dignitary an untouchable despised by God.¹³

But this story contains more than just socio-communal peculiarities: time and space also function in surprising ways.¹⁴ At the outset, Philip receives instruction to 'get up and go κατὰ μεσημβρίαν' (8:26). μεσημβρία is rendered 'toward the south' in the NRSV, but probably should be read as a temporal rather than spatial indicator. It means 'midday' or even 'heat of the day' in the LXX¹⁵ and its only other NT occurrence (Acts 22:6). This time of repose, hot and best spent avoiding the sun,¹⁶ should not be spent travelling—which appears to be the point. 'Ordinary activity (travelling)' undertaken at an 'extraordinary time', 'out of "synch" with regular natural and cultural rhythms, opens a window of opportunity for world shattering knowledge and experience'.¹⁷

Furthermore, the two meet on a 'wilderness' (ἔρημος) road (8:26),¹⁸ again outside the realm of normal activity. The term for 'wilderness', though, is already ringing in the readers' ears, for it appears four times in 7:36–44 as Stephen recounts God's crafting of Israel. As his people pass through the wilderness God strips away the stigma of slavery in Egypt and forges a new identity in the land of promise.¹⁹ Such divine creative activity foreshadows a new identity for the eunuch.

The eunuch, however, reverses Israel's journey in his transforming trek through the wilderness, for he leaves Jerusalem a pilgrim, but still an outsider, to return to his home along the Nile (8:27–28). Indeed, his words reveal an inadequate experience in Jerusalem. First, the deficiencies in his Scriptural understanding were not overcome there, for he embarks on his homeward journey with an appetite for the

¹² Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.290–91 (4.8.40).

¹³ Spencer, *Acts*, 93. For pilgrims excluded from the temple after a long journey see Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.15.3 and *Wars* 6.9.3.

¹⁴ Spencer, *Acts*, 94

¹⁵ Of 25 uses in the LXX, 23 mean 'midday', the only exceptions being Daniel 8:4, 9. See, e.g., Gen. 18:1: 'The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the *heat of the day*'.

¹⁶ Cf. Sir. 43:3: 'at noon [the sun] parches the land, and who can withstand its burning heat?', cited in Spencer, *Acts*, 90.

¹⁷ Spencer, *Acts*, 90; cf. B.R. Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 103.

¹⁸ Note the dual use of Γάζα in 26 ('the road to Gaza') and 27 ('over all her γάζα [treasury]').

¹⁹ Spencer, *Acts*, 90–91.

Scriptures but an inability to interpret them aright ('How can I, unless someone guides me?', 8:31). Still more, and based on the tenor of the eunuch's question, Spencer concludes that the community of the Lord's people has denied him the very fellowship he now craves ('What is to prevent me from being baptized?', 8:36). He providentially encounters another exile from Jerusalem who provides what the religious leaders and even Peter and John (whom 8:25 places back in Jerusalem) have not given. The Lord through Philip offers both instruction and acceptance.²⁰

The gospel thus leaves Jerusalem through the events narrated in chapters 7 and 8. This movement (1) occurs after the death of Stephen; (2) attaches not to Peter but to Philip; (3) quickly reaches Samaria (8:5) and then immediately extends to 'the ends of the earth' in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. 'The eunuch' represents the ultimate outsider, not even capable of circumcision should he desire it, and inadmissible to the temple. He is a despicable character, an abomination to God, who has been rejected in the citadel of Judaism. But by faith he now enters a temple not made with hands and which knows no barriers for men, women and those who defy classification.

There is more, however, to say about the eunuch before the matter of his conversion can be settled. While there is much truth in Howard Kee's assertion that 'in every aspect of his background and role, this man would have been an outsider in terms of covenantal identity based on the Torah',²¹ the fact remains that his racial makeup is unspecified. Even his status as a leading official in a foreign court, while suggesting a Gentile, cannot settle the matter—for the stories of Joseph, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther comprise narratives of Jews who attained high positions in foreign courts. The eunuch reveals his commitment to Judaism by journeying to worship in Jerusalem and reading the Scriptures, a pair of activities associated only with Jews to this point in Luke-Acts.²² Some even maintain that the scroll, unobtainable by a God-fearer, signifies that the eunuch must be a proselyte.²³

So the eunuch stands 'on the edge of Judaism',²⁴ perhaps even as a godfearer²⁵ or proselyte (though those who conclude that he is a Jew

²⁰ Spencer, *Acts*, 91.

²¹ H.C. Kee, *To Every Nation under Heaven: The Acts of the Apostles* (Harrisburg: TPI, 1997), 110.

²² J.B. Tyson, *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 117.

²³ So observes Gaventa (*From Darkness to Light*, 104), though she does not identify who holds this view, and disagrees with it.

²⁴ J.T. Squires, 'The Function of Acts 8:4–12:25', *NTS* 44 (1998) 608–617, esp. 611–12.

probably go too far).²⁶ Despite his connection with Israel, however, the eunuch cannot understand the Scriptures, to say nothing of how they relate to events which only recently unfolded in Jerusalem. Rather than changing God or religion, he needs an introduction to the Suffering Servant of whom Isaiah speaks.

As he tells Saul's story, Luke includes details which recall the eunuch. For example, the incidents are linked by the only two occurrences of the term 'midday' in the NT, a time which, as we have already seen, stands out as significant. The eunuch's question and Saul's, moreover, are essentially the same when, upon their introduction to the Lord, they ask, 'who is this persecuted conqueror?' Neither understands, without divine assistance, how Jesus the Messiah fulfils the Scriptures.

In the end, the Ethiopian eunuch signals the fulfilment of Isaiah 56:3–5, which describes the messianic age as a time when eunuch and Ethiopian have a place in the house of the Lord and a name never to be cut off. Exclusion from Israel's assembly does not mean exclusion from Christ's, and this man's salvation signals the establishment of the latter.²⁷

So is this event a conversion? Gaventa prefers to label the eunuch's experience an 'alteration',²⁸ by which she means that his new position grows out of and proceeds naturally from prior commitments,²⁹ that conversion language is inappropriate.

²⁵ Haenchen, *Acts*, 310 n. 6, 314–15, maintains that he is a Gentile, but that Luke cannot so indicate because it would detract from his story, which requires that Peter produce the first Gentile convert; H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 67, generally agrees, describing it as 'a prelude to Cornelius's conversion'. J.D.G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Narrative Commentaries; Valley Forge: TPI, 1996), 113, describes him as 'close to Israel, but still disadvantaged in relation to its central symbol, the temple' though for physical, not ethnic, reasons. Others are satisfied that, literary problems notwithstanding, he is a Gentile: so Bruce, *Acts*, 175 and Tannehill, *Unity*, II.102–112, who addresses the literary problems by designating it a private event.

²⁶ Tyson, *Images of Judaism*, 117–18, understands him, on literary-structural grounds, to be Jewish.

²⁷ Dunn, *Acts*, 113.

²⁸ Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 107.

²⁹ Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 40.

B. Cornelius

Luke's third narrative panel includes the story of Cornelius,³⁰ a Gentile and a centurion in the Italian Regiment (10:2).³¹ If anyone was ever 'far off, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel' it was the eunuch, with the Gentile soldier, employed by the occupying armies of Rome, lagging only a little behind. We learn from Josephus that many considered army-life out of bounds for a scrupulous Jew: he completes his discussion of the Fulvia-Saturninus incident, which led to the expulsion of the Jews from Rome under Tiberius, by adding that the consuls then drafted 4000 Jews into the military. This resulted in penalty for 'a good many of them, who refused to serve for fear of breaking the Jewish law'. At least that circle of Jews considered law-observance and Roman military service incompatible.³²

Furthermore, elements of Cornelius' paganism remain. Upon meeting Peter, he falls down and worships him (Acts 10:25). Peter's words confirm the foreigner's deficiencies: before enquiring as to why they have sent for him, he reminds all present that this association with foreigners opposes the Law (10:28). God needs to push even a Galilean like Peter before he will enter. Subsequently, and despite his hesitation, Peter needs to defend his entry and table-fellowship in the face of rigorist criticism (11:1–18). Surely Cornelius represents the outsider who needs conversion before he can enter the family of God.

But in truth Luke presents Cornelius as more of an insider to Judaism than the Eunuch. 10:2 lavishly describes his religious allegiance—loyalties not his alone, but shared by his entire household. In fact, the angel who brings words of salvation acknowledges his steadfast and prayerful commitment to Israel's God. Bruce attributes to Cornelius 'every qualification, short of circumcision, which could satisfy Jewish requirements'.³³

Gaventa, in recognising Cornelius' profound identification with Judaism, repeats questions asked about the eunuch. She suggests that Cornelius likewise undergoes 'alteration' rather than conversion. While she nowhere understates the significance of the change, she recognises

³⁰ This section, unhelpfully brief as it is, must remain so due to space considerations. For a fuller stimulating discussion, see G.N. Davies, 'When Was Cornelius Saved', *RTR* 46 (1987) 43–49.

³¹ Of course the focus of the panel is not on Cornelius per se but on the ministry of Peter and so includes a block of material which falls outside our immediate interest, including Peter's restoration of Tabitha.

³² Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.84; see esp. W.C. Van Unnik, 'The Background and Significance of Acts x.4 and 35', *Sparsa Collecta* 1:249.

³³ Bruce, *Acts* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, ²1988), 203.

that Luke desires us to see in Cornelius a loyal follower of Israel's God. 'There is no rejection of the past required here, nor is Cornelius in need of a transformed view of the world.'³⁴

Luke's characterisation shows that the eunuch and Cornelius, despite their piety, are not acceptable to Judaism because of personal and professional realities. But this neither denies their close relationship with the God of Israel before the events recounted in Acts, nor suggests that they need to turn their back on their former way of life. If such are the measure of conversion, Cornelius, like the Eunuch, need not apply.

C. Saul

Saul, like the eunuch but for more sinister reasons, journeys away from Jerusalem. In our trio of salvation accounts, his story contains perhaps the most surprises. Luke consistently portrays him as a murderous wretch without redeeming quality.³⁵ This ardent foe of Christ, who in inducing Christians to blaspheme himself commits blasphemy, cannot be saved, can he?³⁶

1. The Arrested Persecutor

Luke employs verbal repetition to portray the extraordinary change in Saul's life, thereby guiding his readers' recollection and driving him or her to startling discoveries. The repetition of ἄγω provides a suitable example. He uses it first, and three times, in chapter 5, to announce the movement of prisoners (here the arrested apostles). In 6:12 Stephen, confronted with the same situation, must give an account, for he too has been led before the Sanhedrin, that examining body which in the previous chapter has failed only because of divine intervention to silence the apostles. The verb next appears in 8:32 and the quotation of Scripture: 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb

³⁴ Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 122. The evidence of Cornelius' new standing with God is the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, which is mentioned six times: twice by the narrator (10:44–45), once by Peter (10:47), and again three times in chapter 11 (11:15–17) as Peter recalls the experience.

³⁵ The epistles are as clear as Acts that Paul had been a persecutor: see 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6.

³⁶ Luke contrasts Paul with the community he persecutes, for they fulfil expectations which the nation had neglected. For instance, the church's proclamation of salvation and distribution of property are essential ingredients of 'a pattern decreed long ago in the Torah, a pattern linked to obedience toward God (Dt. 15:5) ...' Also, '... in Acts 4:33–35, the apostles' activities are presented as obedience toward God, since they lead to a condition predicted to be the result of obedience in the Torah' (Reasoner, 'Theme of Acts', 640).

silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth' (NRSV). Chapter 9, the place of our immediate interest, provides a meaningful cluster of the verb. In 9:2 Luke relates Saul's plan to lead men and women to Jerusalem, a notion confirmed by 'all who heard him' in 9:21. To this point, each of six occurrences of ἄγω attaches to the handling of prisoners.

With Luke's seventh use of ἄγω³⁷ (9:8) things change, yet stay the same. He indicates that rather than leading those who call upon the name of the Lord, Saul must now be led, himself arrested, the subdued prisoner, until he meets with a member of that circle which he came to lead/arrest. This culminates in 9:27 when Barnabas leads Saul to the leaders of his former foes—no longer blind and bound, but every bit the vanquished enemy (cf. 9:14–16, 21).

Luke similarly develops references to hands. In 2:23 lawless hands kill Jesus; in 4:3 Peter and John, and in 5:18 'the apostles', are arrested by the 'laying on of hands'. But now Saul, whom, we are told three times, has come to bind (9:2, 14, 21), experiences such a devastating encounter with Jesus that 'though his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand' (9:8). In Damascus he stays in the house of Judas (9:11), where he meets with a man named Ananias, who comes and 'lays his hands upon him', at which time Saul's eyes are opened. He is filled with the Spirit, is baptized and eats some food.

Repetition of ἄγω and 'hands' points to the significance of Saul's Damascus Road experience. Luke paints a picture of him as an enemy who must be overcome, who is paid in kind for his treatment of the church.

Curiously, of the three deceased men who are 'insiders' to Christianity thus far in Acts (Judas, Ananias, and Stephen), the two who died for opposing God's work are recalled. Not coincidentally, men named Judas and Ananias (9:10–11) are the means by which Saul is restored, inviting the reader to ask why others died while God spares the life of the church's most violent opponent. Perhaps Stephen's prayer contains the answer, for though he lay dying, this Spirit-filled wonderworker (6:8) entreats the Lord 'not to hold the sin against them'. Precisely here Saul enters the narrative, present and condoning Stephen's death (7:60–8:1). And so the first three men to die in connection with the early church perform a continuing narrative function as they illuminate God's grace in conquering and saving the church's great enemy.

³⁷ This verse uses first the participial form χειραγωγούντες and then εἰσήγαγον.

2. *Membership in the New Community*

One of the main ways that Luke demonstrates Saul's changed relationship with God is to show this change in group affiliations.³⁸ That is, while not an end in itself, his new corporate identity points to the ultimate reality underpinning his change. This Luke accomplishes by forging a chain connecting all the major characters in the apostolic community. Scott Cunningham lists narrative connections between Stephen and the preceding arrests of Peter and John in chapter 4 and the apostles in chapter 5, demonstrating that essentially the same plot appears three times.³⁹ In Acts 15 James provides the link between Peter on the one hand, and Paul, Barnabas and Antiochene Christianity on the other. Thus of the major characters of the early chapters, only Paul, Philip and Stephen remain unconnected.

These links are more than superficial, extending even to the content of Paul's preaching, which overlaps with Peter's in profound ways. Peter highlights divine fulfilment by connecting the Davidic prophecy of 'not abandon[ing] my soul to Hades' from Psalm 16:10⁴⁰ to the promise that God would, on an oath, 'seat one of [David's] descendants upon [David's] throne'⁴¹ and exalt him to the right hand of God (2:33), from where he is to be acknowledged as Lord and Christ (2:36). In 13:33 Paul similarly claims that God's raising of Jesus fulfils messianic promise, for Jesus' resurrection and exaltation declare him to be God's Son. Importantly, the climax of his sermon depends on the same words from Psalm 16 as Peter had earlier employed.⁴² The logical and interpretive moves of Peter and Paul are identical.⁴³ Furthermore, Luke has in this way allowed the Davidic promise of the Holy One's resurrection to introduce and unify the preaching ministry of both Peter and Paul.

³⁸ The discussion of group affiliation vis-à-vis conversion needs, in order to be comprehensive, to take in a wider range of texts. For example, in Lk 17:18, Jesus refers to a healed Samaritan leper as a foreigner (ὁ ἀλλογενής); but Samaritans are monotheists who worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Cf. also Qumran sectarians, who call themselves 'the converts of Israel' in CD 6:5 and 8:16.

³⁹ S. Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations': The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* (JSNTS 142; Sheffield: SAP, 1997), 204.

⁴⁰ Ps. 16:10, cited in Acts 2:27

⁴¹ 2:30; see the explicit connection in 2:31.

⁴² On the declarative value of the resurrection, cf. also Rom. 1:4

⁴³ R.C. Tannehill, 'Rejection by Jews and Turning to Gentiles: The Pattern of Paul's Mission in Acts', *SBL Seminar Papers 1986 Seminar Papers* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1986), 130–41, esp. 131, cf. also 132.

So the persecutor becomes totally immersed in, and advances the cause of, the community which he formerly sought to destroy.⁴⁴ The circle closes completely when in 21:8 Paul lodges with Philip, arguably the initiator of the Gentile mission, and, Luke himself now reminds us, a member of the band of seven from which Stephen emerged.⁴⁵ Thus Paul inhabits that world of Christianity which he formerly tried to exterminate through the killing of Stephen, and reflects its theology in what is sometimes described as his most innovative teaching. As Beker demonstrates, however, it was Stephen and his circle, not Paul, who first linked Jesus' death to the question of the abiding value of the law,⁴⁶ and launched a circumcision-free mission to Gentiles.⁴⁷

III. The Need of Conversion Reconsidered

These three narratives come in rapid succession and, thanks to Luke's careful structuring of his stories, make a cumulative impact. In them we see God do the impossible, for the trio consists of what appear at least at first glance to be two eternal outsiders and an avowed enemy. Only with disregard for Luke's structure could one assert that the eunuch and the centurion undergo great and definitive conversions, while Paul's experience, at the centre, represents something less.

But we have not yet exhausted Luke's characterisation of Paul, and one might even suggest that our distortingly selective account is prejudiced against Stendahl's position. In this section we will reopen the files on Saul/Paul to see what more Luke adds to the story.

It is clear at the outset that Saul lacks the virtues of either the eunuch or Cornelius. He is not presented as searching the Scriptures to understand the Suffering Servant—he has already formed his assessment of Jesus and his followers. Nor is he presented as a pious follower of God. Instead, as we have observed, Luke through various

⁴⁴ Acts 8:3; cf. Gal. 1:13. See also Barrett, *Acts*, 1:442: 'This was a radical change of religious direction, and it was accompanied by as radical a change of action: the active persecutor became an even more active preacher and evangelist. If such radical changes do not amount to conversion it is hard to know what would do so.' Cf. A.F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 14.

⁴⁵ See Acts 6:5.

⁴⁶ Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 184–85, where he responds to Schweitzer's assertion that Paul was the innovator on this matter; cf. also 249–50. Also, cf. Acts 15, where circumcision (15:1) and obedience to the law of Moses (15:5) are the presenting issues.

⁴⁷ Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 249–50. Cf. also 185.

means characterises him as God's enemy. It is worth examining how Luke accomplishes this.

One way that Luke indicates God's favour is by frequent reference to the church's growth (2:41, 47; 4:4; 6:1, 7; 9:31; 16:5). This Gamaliel explicitly states (Acts 5:38–39) when he links success to God's endorsement—a point supported by God himself in 18:9–10 when he tells Paul to proclaim boldly since he has many people in that city. But Luke does not include this because he is interested in growth for its own sake: his selectivity renders this impossible. Consider that he says little about Paul's success in evangelising Gentiles, while discussing at length Paul's relative failure in the synagogues.⁴⁸ Further evidence comes from the Bar Jesus episode in chapter 13 where Luke displays no interest in the conversion of the proconsul: we learn almost in passing that he believed, the chief function of the observation being to 'authenticate Paul's miracle'.⁴⁹ Instead, Luke recounts these events to show that God sides with those who follow Jesus. He repeatedly employs direct discourse to guide the reader, so that the twin assertions, by Gamaliel and the Lord himself, forge an unbreakable chain binding evangelistic success to God's presence.⁵⁰ The primary narrative function of growth is to indicate divine blessing.

Consonant with Gamaliel's counsel is his warning: rather than experiencing blessing, Saul finds himself at war with God (5:39). In 26:14 Paul himself adds the dominical, 'It is hard for you to kick against the goads' (NIV).⁵¹ Inherent to this phrase is the notion of opposition to deity,⁵² again demonstrating that Saul's persecution of the church sets him not only against the church, but against God himself. Garrett describes Luke's language as replete with 'heavy diabolic connotations' even in the description of Saul's 'authority to bind all who call upon Jesus' name' (Acts 9:14).⁵³ On the Damascus Road, Saul learns the truth of Gamaliel's statement.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ N.A. Dahl, 'The Purpose of Luke-Acts', in *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 93–94.

⁴⁹ S.R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 85; also Marshall, *Acts*, 220.

⁵⁰ Reasoner, 'Theme of Acts', 640.

⁵¹ Some Western manuscripts (e.g. E, gig, vg [mss], sy [hmg]) contain this line at 22:7, undoubtedly due to harmonization with 26:14 (and in keeping with the tendency of that manuscript tradition).

⁵² R.N. Longenecker, 'Acts' (Expositor's Bible Commentary: Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 552–53.

⁵³ Garrett, *Demise*, 84.

⁵⁴ Cunningham, *Many Tribulations* 219 n. 110.

Luke's suggestion that Saul opposes God himself fits the story thus far, for Peter and Stephen have both preached of defying God, identifying those who resist Jesus with prophet-killers—an identification which declares that those who oppose Jesus are at war with God, the Scriptures, and the nation's religious heritage. The sermons thus create expectations and define categories of opposition to God which are then realised in the portrayal of Saul. The events of chapter 13 confirm Luke's portrait of Saul as enemy.⁵⁵ Bar Jesus, whom Paul will accuse of being a son of the devil and, in a reversal of the work of John the Baptist, 'making crooked the straight way of the Lord' (13:10, see esp. NRSV), is rendered blind by his encounter with God through Paul, so that he now needs to be led by the hand. The Lord's command at Paul's conversion (26:18) was to 'open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light', but here Paul behaves otherwise. How are we to understand this event?

The answer lies partly in Luke's development of the motifs of light and darkness. The former indicates divine presence within Luke's narratives: Jesus aims 'to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death' (Luke 1:79); in his transfiguration Jesus' garments become 'dazzling white' (9:29); a light shines upon Peter when the angel awakens him in prison (Acts 12:7). In the same way, darkness adheres to evil: Jesus links his arrest to the 'power of darkness' in Luke 22:53; and mist and darkness envelope Bar Jesus in Acts 13:11. Operating similarly to light and darkness are references to the eyes: Jesus has been sent 'to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind' (Luke 4:18); when Ananias addresses Saul, 'something like scales' fall from the latter's eyes (Acts 9:18); Bar Jesus, blinded, cannot 'see the sun for a time' (Acts 13:11).⁵⁶

Enlarging the circle further, the language of darkness echoes the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 28 contains the threat that 'the Lord will send upon you curses, confusion, and rebuke ... because you have forsaken me' (Dt. 28:20), 'and you shall grope *at noon* [μεσημβρία once again], as the blind man gropes in darkness' (28:29).⁵⁷ Isaiah writes concerning Israelites whose sins separate them from God (59:2), that 'they hasten to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; devastation and destruction are in their highways. They do not know the way of peace, and there is no justice in their tracks; they have *made*

⁵⁵ Note too 13:11: the 'hand of the Lord' is said to be upon Bar Jesus.

⁵⁶ S.R. Garrett, "'Lest the Light in You Be Darkness": Luke 11:33–36 and the Question of Commitment', *JBL* 110 (1991) 93–105, esp. 95–96.

⁵⁷ See also Dt. 28:28, which refers to 'blindness and bewilderment of heart'.

their paths crooked ... (59:7–8). The consequence of such activity is that ‘we hope for light, but behold, darkness; for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope along the wall like blind men, we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at *midday* as in the twilight ...’ (59:9–10).⁵⁸ This same darkness informs our reading of Acts 13, as Paul, the former foe, becomes the means by which the Lord overwhelms the devil, whose mighty servant, Bar Jesus, must now grope in the darkness and, importantly for Luke’s story, be ‘led about by the hand’.⁵⁹

The parallels between Saul and Bar Jesus are that both (1) in opposing the divine word opposed God himself; (2) were blinded; (3) needed to be led by the hand.⁶⁰ In Paul’s doing to Bar Jesus precisely what the Lord had done to him, we learn something of how Luke viewed the pre-Christian Paul: we see once again, through this refracted image, that Saul was not formerly in a favourable, or even neutral, position with respect to God. He was at war with the Holy One, separated by his sins and active opposition. Susan Garrett accordingly concludes that ‘Luke regarded Paul too as an agent of the devil at the time when Christ overtook him.’⁶¹ But now, in Paul’s triumph, we observe the dramatic reversal, and further see, indicated by his name change, a corresponding internal transformation: from this point the name Saul never again appears in Acts.

So why does God spare Saul, but not Judas, Ananias, Sapphira, Herod, or even Stephen? Luke says nothing to elicit sympathy for Saul: indeed he portrays him as a vicious animal⁶² who must be stopped by divine intervention. The reader therefore identifies with the mistrust and hesitation of Ananias (and later those Jerusalem Christians who embrace him most reluctantly), but soon enough Luke reveals, and we discover with Ananias, that Saul has not really been spared: he must suffer greatly for the name of the Lord (9:16).⁶³ Luke thus magnifies that mercy which grants life even to God’s enemies.

⁵⁸ Garrett, *Demise*, 82, 150 n. 18. Note too that Peter had already alluded to Dt. 29:17 (cf. Dt. 29:19).

⁵⁹ Garrett, *Demise*, 85.

⁶⁰ Witherington, *Acts*, 402.

⁶¹ Garrett, *Demise*, 84.

⁶² The verbs of both 8:3 and 9:1 create this impression.

⁶³ In a monograph devoted to the death of Herod in Acts, Wesley Allen argues that Saul and Herod occupy similar narrative positions in what he labels ‘death of tyrant scenes’. His form critical work, based on an examination of similar ‘death of tyrant’ stories in Graeco-Roman and Jewish literature, leads him to describe the essential features of Saul’s story as follows. First, the setting for intervention is given: in Acts 8:1–3, by means of a scene-change we learn that the persecution is intensifying. Saul

Similarities to Bar Jesus only apply to Saul before conversion. After, Luke presents Paul in terms recalling Stephen. For example, immediately following his conversion, Paul 'confounds the Jews' of Damascus (9:22) who are declared to be Hellenists in 9:29, echoing Stephen's own debates with the Jerusalem Hellenists in 6:9–10. Furthermore, in both stories preaching begets persecution. Accordingly, the 'Stephen–Paul parallels' intensify in Acts 21–23 with Paul's arrest in Jerusalem.⁶⁴ By continuing to connect Paul with Stephen (and even with his dying prayer—as noted earlier), Luke indicates that Paul dons the mantle stripped from Stephen, that of the persecuted witness, showing that death can no more arrest the gospel than it could stop Jesus himself.⁶⁵

So Saul goes from opposing God and persecuting Jesus to joining the persecuted side. Stendahl and others reserve the term conversion for the transfer from one religion to another, but how should we appraise the significance of moving from opposition to membership? And, as we have seen, membership is in a defined group begun by those who were followers of Jesus before Paul.⁶⁶ Furthermore, that Luke considered 'Christian' an appropriate designation for the group is evident from Acts 26: Paul asserts that Agrippa knows and believes the prophets (26:27), an assertion which the king recognizes as a strategy intended to persuade him to become Χριστιανόν (26:28). But Saul's change indicates more than membership in a new community: by dramatizing

not only approves of Stephen's death, but now intends to transport the outbreak of violence to Damascus. Secondly, the accusation is stated: Acts 9:4 contains such a charge: 'why do you persecute me'. Thirdly, the punishment is attributed: it is the Lord himself who confronts Saul. Fourthly, the punishment is meted out: gruesome pain, worms, death (12:23). Surprisingly, Saul does not meet with death. Allen compares this to the accounts of Heliodorus and Apollonius in the Maccabean literature (see 2 Macc. 3:1–40 and 4 Macc. 4:1–14 respectively.), which, he says, present a foil to Antiochus Epiphanes. That is, 'what we find is a manipulation of the conventional elements of the Death of Tyrant type-scene' by which 'the reader is led to expect (and probably desire) a retributive conclusion to the scene only to be given the reverse conclusion (i.e. salvation/conversion/call)'. O.W. Allen, Jr., *The Death of Herod: The Narrative and Theological Function of Retribution in Luke-Acts* (SBLDS 158; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 126–28. The main hesitation concerning Allen's analogy is that Herod does not die because he arrests or kills Christians, but quite clearly, 'because he did not give God the glory' (Acts 12:23).

⁶⁴ Cunningham, *Many Tribulations* 206, n. 70.

⁶⁵ Cunningham, *Many Tribulations* 205–206; Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, II.100.

⁶⁶ In Gal. 1:13–16, when Paul reflects on his former life, he says that he 'excessively persecuted the church and sought to destroy it, and advanced in Judaism . . .', thus relating the persecution to the advance, an association even clearer in Phil. 3:6 (cf. J.L. Martyn, *Galatians* [AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997], 154–55). He apparently sees the church and at least advancing in the ancestral traditions, if not Judaism itself, (Gal. 1:14) as distinct and mutually exclusive categories.

the move from one group to another, Luke portrays entry into a relationship with the God who defines the group's interests. By means of the change from persecutor to persecuted, Luke shows that Paul was converted.⁶⁷

A final parallel may prove illuminating. Perhaps the Lukan conversion most closely resembling Paul's is that of a pure and unadulterated pagan, the Philippian gaoler. Paul is caught between warring spirits and, inconveniently, having freed an oracle from her indwelling spirit, ends up flogged, bloodied, imprisoned, etc.—precisely those things from which one hopes to be spared by oracular insight. The accusation—that he, a Jew, proclaims customs 'which we Romans do not lawfully observe' (Acts 16:21)—stands in stark contrast to the modern charge of bringing a European religion to those who have their own eastern practices. The first irony is that he, a Roman, engages in just that activity which the Philippians deny to Romans. The second is that his bloodied body and imprisonment do not testify that his God has lost, but instead precipitate another great victory for God in Philippi: the conversion of the gaoler and his household. Paul goes to prison confident in God's purposes (as reflected in the praying and singing: 16:25), and has, once again, a captive audience.

The gaoler, like Saul, quickly discovers himself to be 'kicking against the goads', for his question 'what must I do to be saved?' (16:30) comes only after he learns that every prisoner is accounted for (16:28). The query springs, then, not from repercussions over lost prisoners, but from the fresh discovery that in his prison, and under his watch, languish the representatives of a greater God—one who can shake the earth in order to liberate his friends. Apocalyptic events such as blinding lights and earthquakes prompt questions; in this case not Saul's 'who are you?' (Acts 9:5) but 'what must I do to be saved?' (Acts 16:30). In both cases, the answer centres on the name of Jesus and results in belief, salvation, baptism and a meal.

IV. Conclusion

Rather than offer a definition of conversion, we have attempted to work with the one implied by those who deny that Saul was converted since he did not change religious affiliation. We have seen that nothing in Saul's identity or character puts him in a proper relationship with God.

⁶⁷ So, e.g. Barrett, *Acts*, 1:442.

Gaventa can say that the eunuch experienced an alteration because his new position grows out of and proceeds naturally from prior commitments: likewise she says of Cornelius that 'there is no rejection of the past required here, nor is [he] in need of a transformed view of the world'. But none of this is true of Saul. His faith in Jesus is neither an outgrowth nor a natural result of prior commitments: rather than natural it is born of the supernatural.⁶⁸ He must therefore reappraise his past, reject his present, and completely re-evaluate his view of God and what he is doing in the world. His assessment of Jesus involves a redefining of the nature of God himself, and demands a new hermeneutic⁶⁹ which pulls down and then reconstructs his theology of Scripture, the Law and the way to live for God.⁷⁰ Rather than being above conversion, of the main characters we have considered, Saul was perhaps the greatest stranger to the ways of God, and therefore needed a life-changing, radical reorientation. Indeed, his opposition to God and his servants placed him closest to Bar Jesus and the Philippian gaoler.

Gaventa acknowledges significant parallels between Saul on the one hand, and the eunuch and Cornelius on the other, but emphasises the differences: 'Saul is not, to say the least, a willing hearer of the good news'; moreover, Ananias, unlike Philip in Acts 8:27, 'does not silently acquiesce to the strange command he receives about Saul ... These dissimilarities arise from the fact that Luke insists in countless ways on Saul's identity as enemy of the church. Unlike either the Ethiopian or Cornelius, Saul is a Jew, but his behaviour as enemy has removed him from those who may legitimately be called "brother".'⁷¹ In short, Saul needs to move from one group to another, a change which is accepted only reluctantly by informed members of the new group, and which puts him at enmity with members of the old. Is this not the change in group affiliation which we referred to at the outset? Does not Luke take great pains to show that an established group did indeed exist and that Saul moved from outside to inside? Is it not the case that Paul was granted membership in the new group, at least at some level, because he, rather than creating its theology, shared with Peter, and Stephen

⁶⁸ Cf. Gal. 1:11–12 and discussion by J. Hester in 'Epideictic Rhetoric and Persona in Galatians 1 and 2', in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, ed. M.D. Nanos (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 181–96, esp. 198.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of Paul's new hermeneutic, see P.T. O'Brien, 'Was Paul Converted?' in *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 2: The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D.A. Carson, P.T. O'Brien and M.A. Seifrid; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, forthcoming).

⁷⁰ Cf. esp. Gal. 2:19.

⁷¹ Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 123.

that which made up its cores beliefs concerning Jesus? The story as Luke presents it would seem to require an affirmative response to all such questions.

What then is the basis of Paul's reorientation? In Acts 26:15–18, the first person account of his conversion, Paul reveals that Jesus himself has appointed him, promised to rescue him from his own people and the Gentiles, and sent him to 'open their eyes, turn them from darkness to light', and show the way to 'forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in [Jesus]'. Paul, moreover, continues by relating that he preached, 'first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance (26:20)'. All were confronted with the same need. Furthermore, sermons to Jewish audiences by Peter and Stephen appeal for repentance. Can one maintain that Saul, portrayed as a confederate of the devil, an opponent of God, and ultimately an advocate for universal repentance, failed to see his own need for repentance and *entry into* a relationship with the God he formerly opposed? Saul's credentials were, to be sure, impressive, but salvation rests on firmer foundations. Luke, by presenting well-constructed characters, magnifies Saul's need—and so reminds his readers that salvation is indeed all of grace.