

# The Bible as a Multicultural Phenomenon: Saul's Conversion on the Way of Damascus

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**T**HE BOOK OF ACTS MAY REMAIN one of the least commented books of the NT, but the number of the exegetical works discussing it has been growing steadily during the last few decades and this fact is all the more true for the present day time. This great interest exists chiefly because the book is particularly suggestive if seen from the perspective of the *different cultural settings* of the time when it was written. Following such a reading of this first-century composition, one may address successfully issues of the contemporary multicultural society.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the core-messages of the Lucan text is that the *way of Christians is the way of salvation*. In this sense, it is only right to both draw this historical fulfilment towards the Jews and their eschatological expectations and to lay a particular emphasis on its openness to the Gentiles. Luke appears accordingly a mission-minded author.

We have to see in the light of this attempt why the heart of the text, i.e. chapters 9-10, is given by Luke a pivotal role in the history of Acts. The two major stories (involving Paul and, respectively, Peter) denote the importance of the conversion of the Gentiles, as they are sheep of the same Shepherd, though belonging, for the moment, to a different flock than that of the Jews.

This exegetical essay will focus on the event of Apostle Paul's conversion (Saul's) as it is sketched by Luke in Acts 9, 1-19a.

Until this point in the development of the history in Acts, it is perhaps accurate to say that the figure of the Apostle Peter is given the central role. Yet, starting with the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter, the key character is the new convert Paul, the ex-Pharisee Saul.

## 1. ELEMENTS FOR A CRITICAL EXEGESIS

Though in a time when a hermeneutical switch from the author to the text, there are in this particular story a few very important issues regarding its redaction, which, if considered, may lead to quite different perspectives. Therefore, it is by no means useless to describe them, by way of introduction of the true analysis of the text.

The importance of Saul's conversion is obviously stressed by Luke since he gives three different accounts of it, firstly in Ch. 9 but afterwards also at 22, 3-21 and 26, 2-23. These other two accounts are set against the background of Paul's self-defence speeches delivered to opponents. Considering the similarities and differences between these (and Paul's own version in Gal. 1) has been always a task of the exegetes. Some of these exegetes' views will be considered

consequently. At stake is, mainly, the very true *character of Saul's conversion*: was it more of a 'conversion' or more of a 'call'?

Firstly, the commentators have been concerned with setting the story against the Jewish and Hellenistic literary backgrounds. It has been noticed that there are similarities with both these, and the most significant are recalling the Old Testament: the story of Balaam (Numbers 22, 21-35/see *Taylor* 15), the story of the "conversion" of Heliodor (2 Maccabees 3, 23-28/contra *Conzelmann*), and, more important, links to the calls of the prophets (esp. Ezekiel 1-3/*Boismard/Lamouille* 122-3).

Secondly, in search for a reason for why did Luke present the same story thrice, scholars have got back to asking which are the sources of Luke; if he is the author of all these accounts, then what is the purpose of this enterprise, given the obvious distinct ways of presenting the same story. As stated already above, this debate is very important, as it may uncover the way Luke looked at Paul and his mission – and, indeed, the way the latter looked at his mission himself –, and, further, the way Luke understood to define, through his historiographical attempt, the very meaning of the history of salvation in the Church of Christ.

As a general idea, it is considered that the agreement between the accounts stands better than the distinctive details (*Barett* 441). The essential message is to be found in all three messages (vv. 4-5). Nevertheless, considering the details, one seeks the discrepancy in two directions (*Taylor* 2-5), i.e. as a result of:

- a. Redaction/different sources
- b. Luke's narrative technique.

The first approach is a critique of the text of Acts, as it considers seriously severe alteration(s) in its development. For *Boismard/Lamouille* this approach is more suitable, though they present somehow a combination of the two directions of exegesis. It is considered that the first describer of Saul's conversion was a predecessor of St. Luke, whose version may be traced in the present account at 9, 3; 9, 4a; 9, 6; 9, 8; 9, 9a; 9, 12. These are, therefore, the fundamental texts (*cf. Taylor* 12). Afterwards, Luke tells the story from his own perspective, and he *adds* the dialogue between Saul and Jesus, as from the *first* account nothing allows us to consider that Jesus was the one talking to Saul (*Boismard/Lamouille* 123). Therefore the one who speaks from heavens was God (theophany) and not, as Luke forwardly puts it, Jesus Christ (Christophany) (contra, *cf. I Cor.* 9, 1). Thus, the final redaction of the text in Acts appears to be the work of some other writer who continued Luke.

On the other hand, the second approach gives an emphasis to a certain Lucan aim to rewrite the history. The existence of the three comparable but not identical accounts is explained by the use of a literary technique: "the narratives are composed so as to supplement, complement and correct one another." (*Hedrick* 432) Once considering this hypothesis, one can ask oneself what is the prevailing aspect in Saul's conversion, the conversionary or the vocational. In a general sense, conversion is a call. For *Dillon* (733), the story told in Ch. 9 is one of conversion, not of vocation, given the fact that no mission is actually entrusted to Paul at the very moment; he is only sent to Ananias, and only through Christ's revelation to the latter (vv. 15-16), the reader can get an image of the future Apostle Paul. However, in the second account the image about

Saul's call grows clearer and, in the third account, it achieves an equal status to the conversionary aspect of the event (no blindness and healing; differences in the sensory effect of the appearance; final suppression of Paul's baptism/*Dillon*, *ibid*). Therefore, it is perhaps right to notice in Acts an increasing stress on the vocation, according to Luke's own narrative interest. He thus *strikes* in Ch. 9, addresses a *Jewish audience* in Ch. 22 (see "Jesus of Nazareth" and "Ananias' observance of the law") and *abbreviates* the story in Ch. 26 (*Barrett* 444-5).

Nevertheless, the best balance between conversion and vocation one must seek in Apostle Paul's confession in Gal. 1 (see *Barrett* 442). As a matter of fact, an issue here is the status of the new convert: his apostleship. For Apostle Paul himself, when this apostolate was challenged, the event on the way of Damascus was a modality of recalling God's choice for him (I Cor. 9, 1) and he definitely regarded this experience as a turning point in his life and hence, a *conversio* (*Fitzmyer*<sup>a</sup> 1333). Paul claims he saw the resurrected Christ in the way other chosen ones saw Him (I Cor 15, 5-8); in the Acts, however, the author takes care not to call him frequently apostle and to differentiate him from the Twelve. Luke prefers, therefore, to preserve for Paul the precise role of the evangeliser of the Gentiles (*Hanson* 113).

The following will try to comment on the text as we have it; a few minor hypothetical assertions will be still made, if required for best reading.

## 2. SAUL'S VISION (9, 3-8)

The first verses of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter introduce Saul's persecuting activity against the followers of Christ. "Still breathing out murderous threats" (recall to the first appearance of Saul in Acts, i.e. at 8, 3), he is carrying letters from the high priest in Jerusalem against those disciples of the crucified one who were thought to be living in Damascus.

As he is getting close to the city, Saul faces a remarkable revelatory experience. In a biblical style (in the sequence of the narratives of the prophets), Luke describes this epiphany as sensorial – as it was the custom of doing it in the common literature of the time. Thus, the light is a common feature of these epiphanies (see *Bruce* 196). This strike of the light means not that it was somewhat of a Gnostic experience. Luke presents it as a regular physical accompaniment of the divine glory of Christ (*Barrett* 449). I prefer this opinion to the one that argues for the fact that the light functions as a weapon against the persecutor (*Dillon* 744). This non-revelatory character of the coming of the light is thought to be underlined by Saul's counter-question in v. 5 as he didn't recognize in the speaker the persecuted Lord (*ibid*). I think here is a failure of understanding the v. 4. It is true that in time from these words has been developed the Christian ecclesiology, but one should not expect Saul to *realize* that in his disciples Christ himself is persecuted (Luke 10, 16); the revelation is not set already at the moment of Saul's question, but is fulfilled when Jesus reveals himself as the living (super-) human being persecuted in his followers (v. 6). Only now we can speak of the revelatory character of the vision, somehow calling back to God's answer in the OT, "I am Who I am," but in a remarkable ke-notic way.

Saul is directed to the Church in Damascus, which looks like it is the mediator of his teaching (despite Gal. 1, see *Conzelmann* 71). It is not an attempt of minimizing Apostle Paul but of showing the power of Christ; altogether, we should not omit Luke's general aim to link Apostle Paul with both Damascus and Jerusalem Churches (*Barett* 450)

About Saul's companions we are told that they "stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone". As we cannot safely presume that they were Saul's assistants in his activity of persecution, the main meaning of their presence was to bear witness, though partially, to this revelation. They heard the talking without understanding, and without seeing Saul's interlocutor. It was advanced the hypothesis that they heard only Saul's voice (*Bruce* 197; cf. Acts 22, 9, *Hedrick* 430-1); however, in order to bear witness, they had to hear the voice from above, as the appearance was meant for Saul only.

The blindness that affects Saul is not meant as a punishment, but as an edificatory visible sign to indicate "the helplessness of one formerly so powerful (22, 11)" (*Conzelmann* 72; also *Barett* 452). He is helped to enter Damascus by his companions.

### 3. SAUL IN DAMASCUS (9, 10-19A)

Once there, we are informed he was blind for three days (anticipation of the cure). One should notice the numeral three for the number of days he spent in darkness. The resemblance with the narrative about Jesus Christ is obvious: it is like Saul's resurrection from the death of ignorance. During this time, he did not drink or eat. We are not told of this was a consequence of a deliberate decision taken by Apostle Paul. Therefore, there are equally possible two versions: that it was due to the shock or as repentance (in order to get baptism). The modern commentators incline to the former, as the old commentators argued for the pre-baptismal fasting.

The appearance of Ananias is of sharp peculiarity in the narrative. That is because Paul does not make any referral to Ananias, and generally the whole part is set against Gal. 1 (*Taylor* 16). The very existence of Ananias is under debate, as it is not impossible that Luke invented this character (contra *Barett* 444). For John Chrysostom, the person of Ananias has a certain place in the divine place: God didn't choose a person of high importance since Apostle Paul was to be taught only by Christ Himself (following Gal. 1). Moreover, God does not bring him to the apostles who were so admired, and shows that there is nothing of man here (*Chrysostom*, Homily XX).

Verses 13-14 are considered often as redaction work only. They describe how Ananias took a strong hesitation to follow Jesus' indications. This fear (Chrysostom was comparing it with Moses') may not have been present; Ananias has to have obeyed (*Dillon* 744) but Luke is enlarging the story in order to set an emphasis on the incredible, radical character of this conversion. It is senseless to see in this hesitation Anania's fear that Lord Jesus might have been deceived by Saul (cf. *Chrysostom*). We can only imagine how strong was Saul's image as persecutor of the followers of Christ in the mind of Ananias (it may simply serve Luke's purpose, of course). Consequently, the Lord Jesus Christ speaks – in a biblical style chosen by Luke –, in order to wash away all

of Ananias' fears. Saul/Paul is altogether Christ's chosen vessel and the one who is meant to suffer, the powerful and the weak (vv. 15-6). The reference made to suffering is certainly Luke's anticipation of the hardships of Paul's missionary life described later on in Acts 12, 25 – 28, 31 (*Hedrick* 421).

Ananias welcomes now Saul among the saints, the Christians, calling him "brother Saul" (contra, cf. *Bruce* 198). He shares in Saul's conversion by assuring him that he knows all about his vision, though we are not told by which means he had found out (by the revelation of the Holy Spirit, says *Chrysostom*). The laying on of the hands, the cure and the baptism have proved difficult to comment on. They are thought generally as signs of Luke's deep involvement in the story, as he proved often an inclination to 'sacraments'. Was the laying on of the hands an act prior to baptism and related to it? Rather, it was an act of healing (*Barett* 457). Luke's narrative makes difficult the separation between the two acts: the healing and the giving of the Spirit (no audible phenomena reported at this imparting of the Holy Spirit, *ibidem*) Whether the baptism is Luke's addition (in order to frame perfectly the story of conversion) or not, is impossible to say for certain.

## CONCLUSION

The story of Saul's conversion is for Luke crucial, because it is meant not only to match his soteriological frame, but also to act as the connecting link between the apostolic time and Luke's own time (*Conzelmann*). That is why St. Luke is so careful to include Saul in the church, firstly in Damascus, afterwards in Jerusalem (second part of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter). This soteriological frame has its red thread as follows: the same God of the law is the one who revealed himself in Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world. Saul's God is one and the same with Paul's God. The only thing Apostle Paul has got now is a new Messianic view, as his theology is now also Christology and, moreover the Messianic time has begun, imposing Parousia as target (*Fitzmyer*<sup>b</sup> 1385-6). And this theology is most of all the result of his experience on the way of Damascus.

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